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Prologue

Thanks to her tendency to suddenly throw up whenever she tried to pry into the paranormal that lay in the crevices of this world, I had unconsciously forgotten, but the girl known as Yoishi Mitsurugi, was a beauty.

“I thought I’d start by getting to know you a little better.”

With a line like that, she started living—or rather, parasitizing in my loft apartment for about a month now, and a lot of things have happened. So many things have happened that I now realized something basic.

She always looked like she was in a daze, but I too would often find myself in daze when looking at her profile. It was because I was overwhelmed by the length of her eyelashes, the depth of her eyes, and the beauty of her lips, which were shaped in a cheeky curve, though her nose was what somewhat small. Argh, it can’t really be explained well just by describing her features individually. Anyway, when they’re mixed in together with her black hair and her straight-cut bangs, it’s like they begin to take on a kind of fairy-like aura, and I think to myself:

What a waste.

That’s right, If I were to give an analogy, she was like a wild cat, untouched by human hands.

To begin with, her abnormality in not taking a bath was evident of that. She was so stubborn about it that if you were to let her be, she probably wouldn’t take a bath for the rest of her life. The dirt, sweat and odor on her body combined to form an awful stink and that’s why, on the second day of her parasitizing in my home, I forced her to take a bath. She looked truly annoyed and babbled something incomprehensible: “Frequent cleaning weakens an organism’s

immune system", but what's really annoying is someone who's unaware of their own stench to the people around them. Of course, I couldn't do it with her naked, so I made her sit down in front of the bathroom sink in her school uniform, and washed her damned long hair twice. I rinsed it afterwards, applying the hair treatment I had bought, and carefully dried it with a hair dryer. Thanks to that, her black hair regained its original beauty, like pearls that spilled downwards, but it was a little funny to see Yoishi endlessly fiddling with her shiny, silky black hair with an iffy look on her face, as if it were not her own.

Speaking of 'wild cat', she usually had her arms on her knees, looking a little lonely as she gazed at something only she could see. If one were to see that scene alone, she would resemble a young girl who was dreaming, and in a sense, it could be a scene from a fairy tale. Yet suddenly, in an instant, she would realize something. That something was a faint sensation born in the border between this world and that one, a strange feeling that had been twisted by the malice of humans. She alone would notice these tiny scars that most people would live without noticing; She would raise her beautiful eyebrows, and whisper, "It's strange". Before I'd realized, I would find the ground swaying beneath my feet, and be inevitably thrust down to the world beyond, forced to run away with tears in my eyes every time.

That's right, if you leave out the occult part, she's like a quiet and inconspicuous sixteen-year-old girl. With a height of about 160 cm, she probably doesn't weigh that much. I'd say she's on the skinny side, but her butt is in pretty good shape. If she walked with her chest up, she would look good in her own way, but since she was always hunched over with her back rounded and her head hung down, her beautiful appearance was rarely communicated to the world. She seemed to have no friends of her own age or sex at school -- Was it because she slept or read books in class? Or was it because of the barrier she set around herself that made her hard to approach? Was a cold wind blowing at her feet? Or was she carrying an invisible old woman on her back? Whatever the case may be, she always had a gloomy atmosphere surrounding her.

"Say, don't you have some club activities or something?"

I asked Yoishi on a certain day.

I was concerned about her future, as soon as she got home from school, she started opening all kinds of creepy books such as, ‘A History of Medieval Execution Devices’, ‘A Genealogy of Homicidal Maniacs’, ‘Case Files from Unsolved Atrocities’. I thought that if she at least started club activities, she’d make friends, start paying attention to the way people looked at her, and that might change her in various ways – however--

“It’s meaningless.”

Yoishi retorted without even closing the book she was reading.

“I mean, student life isn’t just about studying all the time. I'm sure that having silly conversations with friends is something important that you’ll only be able to experience at this time of your life.”

She cocked her head to the side in response, as I continued to add:

“How should I explain this, having high school friends is like having a telepathic understanding, or like having a comradery with someone who you share meals with, something like having a blood fellowship with someone who can understand you without having to talk about it. I’m sure that it will be an important asset for you in the future.”

“Future…?”

“Yes, the future. Don't you have something you want to do in the future? I don’t know if you want to go on to university or get a job, but you’ve thought about it a little, right?”

“No.”

“Huh, no...? You haven’t even thought about it once?”

“Most of what we plan and worry about for the future, with all of its undetermined complexities, will be for naught.”

“Well, that’s true, but…”

I tried to come up with some kind of rebuttal, but Yoishi suddenly

began speaking something incomprehensible.

“It is said that a first-rate professional Shogi player can read 30 moves ahead in the beginning, and 500 to 600 moves ahead in the middle of a game - but even with that much, the difference between victory and defeat can be a momentary error in judgment, or a hole in one's thinking. That is to say nothing of this world, where countless people live.”

I thought life and Shogi were different, but, at the end of the day, wasn’t everything in life like a composed shogi problem?[1] I didn’t know anymore, so in the end, I kept my mouth shut. It wasn’t until much later on that I realized she had dodged my question.

At any rate, I don’t know if it was because she’d read countless books, but I was no match for her when it came to arguments. She would thoroughly answer questions that she could answer, but in situations like this when she decided (one-sidedly) that it would be safer not to answer, she would often brush me off like this. And the me of the time wouldn’t even realize that she was being evasive.

However, the signs came suddenly.

On a certain day, I found a stuffed toy of a frog dangling from the edge of her worn-out bag. “So, you like those kinds of things too, huh?”, I laughed. She glared at me and took off the doll and placed it inside her bag, but I was probably somewhat relieved at the time. No, you might even say that it gave me strength. It was a kind of hope: If Yoishi’s heart, which was completely stained pitch black, still had the mentality of attaching a stuffed doll to her bag, there was still some hope after all.

Thereafter, I started trying different things. Her meals always consisted of snack food from the convenience store and soft drinks in PET bottles, so I cooked her some stir-fried spinach as a test; She sniffed it incessantly for about a minute, before finally eating it. Without describing It as delicious or unsavory, she simply ate it in silence, without leaving any leftovers behind. She still wouldn’t take baths voluntarily, but when I called on her to take a bath once every three days, she would somehow manage to sit down meekly in front of the bathtub. She even started to clean up her own vomit when I

told her to. That was without a doubt the training of a wildcat, but it was definitely accompanied by the sense that things were somehow moving forward.

The fact that a high school girl who I was not in a relationship with was parasitizing in my loft was certainly not something that I could be open about from a socially acceptable point of view. However, a hope was starting to bud inside me that I might be able to help her adjust into society: She who had diverged to the paranormal and away from the common sense of this world.

I would turn Yoishi Mitsurugi into a respectable high school girl.

Well, I didn't exactly know what being a respectable high school girl entailed, but at any rate, shouldn't Yoishi Mitsurugi be improving her lifestyle and habits so that she can smile and live more brightly under the sun? I'm sure that she would be cute when she smiles. I mean, she has all the ingredients. I'm sure it will be so adorable that it would be enough to remake the landscape of the entire universe. I wanted to see that smile—no, it didn't matter what I wanted, at any rate, I was determined.

Yes, everything begins with determination and resolve.

And with that—

The 'Yoishi Mitsurugi Rehabilitation Plan' had begun.

Case 09: Dear Nostradamus-sama

“Have you ever been on a date?”

It was on a sunny Sunday afternoon around the end of November. I had gotten up early, taken a shower, tidied myself up properly, changed into a clean pair of shirt and jeans, and after wallowing in indecision, finally broke the ice.

“A date is, well, going out somewhere alone with the opposite sex.”

I elaborated further in a somewhat restless tone, and Yoishi, who was doing something in the loft, looked down at me and spoke nonchalantly without expression, “I have”, leaving me flabbergasted.

“Huh…? Y-you have? Ah, I guess that’s right… You’re a high school girl after all. I mean, you might have even had a boyfriend or two in the past, but – it’s somewhat unexpected, no, sorry. Anyway, uhhh…”

Flustered and incoherent, Yoishi pointed her long index finger towards me, Koumei university institute first year, Yamada Nagito, who had just turned nineteen the other day.

“I’m always going places with you.”

“You idiot, those are creepy haunted spots! And what’s more, that’s definitely not something you’d call an exciting date!”

“I don’t know about it being exciting, but –”

After gazing at me with her large eyes, she muttered briefly.

“I had fun.”

My heart suddenly started pounding for some reason. I felt a heat

around my solar plexus, where it began to squirm and writhe.

“No, ummm… It’s not like I didn’t have fun as well, and to be precise, there were some places where I was looking for a moderate amount of scariness – but anyway, what I'm talking about is a little different from that.”

--Why am I in such a panic?

I coughed once to clear my throat, and forced myself to return to the topic at hand.

“Anyway, let’s try going on a date.”

“…A date.”

“That’s right. The weather is nice, so you and I should go to somewhere, let’s hang out someplace fun for no reason in particular, somewhere that’s not a haunted place. I mean, it’s coincidentally my day off today, and I just got my salary; I can’t take you anywhere too expensive, but eating out or watching a movie is fine.”

‘How about it?’, I ask her again; Yoishi pondered for a while before giving a single nod and withdrawing to the loft. She seemed to be changing her clothes from the spare jersey I gave her which she’d been wearing at home recently. Eventually she came down from the loft dressed in her usual black blazer from the Koumei high school.

“You’re gonna go dressed like that?”

Yoishi nodded once.

“…You need to buy some clothes, too.”

“I’m fine with this.”

With a blunt reply, she stood up and left the apartment ahead of me.

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Ah man, how long had it been since I'd been on a date?

I guess the last time was when I had a girlfriend in high school. No, if you were to include that time I went shopping with the girl I was friends with, then it's a little more after that. Come to think of it, Christmas is just around the corner. Christmas, isn't it a big occasion for lovers, or couples who will soon become lovers? I mean, I don't mean to say that the two of us are headed in that direction, however, if by some chance that should happen, since it's Yoishi, she would probably continue to live shamelessly with me in my loft. And then to picture the two of us wearing Christmas hats and ringing crackers in front of the cake...but—

…Oh wow, we don't look good together at all.

With my thoughts swirling on such matters, I became completely quiet. Of course Yoishi wasn't the talkative type to begin with, so we walked around town looking like we had come back from a funeral.

"Let's watch a movie."

I suggested as such, Yoishi nodded and followed me in silence.

We barely spoke to each other in the theater, and after we finished watching the movie I commented, 'That was entertaining, wasn't it?', to which Yoishi merely gave a small nod in acknowledgment. After that I suggested we drink some coffee and went around to a famous coffee shop, but the vicinity of Kichijouji station was packed to the brim on a Sunday, and we couldn't get in because there was a long line of customers waiting outside.

"It's crazy how many people are here."

Saying that kind of silly line, I turned back to see Yoishi looking deathly pale as she staggered along.

"Hey, are you okay?"

"…People."

“People…? What about them?”

“People, people, people - vasovagal reflex.”

I didn’t understand well but, it seemed she was suffering a severe bout of dizziness from being in a crowd. Come to think of it, she seemed to be able to see the malice of humans as well as ghosts. And if she was exposed to a certain amount, she’d end up inverting it as a vomiting phenomenon. In other words, walking in the midst of this many people, she might start vomiting all of a sudden. Realizing that, I panicked, and started looking for the entrance to a restaurant we could enter.

Thankfully, we found a seat by the window that had just opened up on the second floor of a fast-food restaurant, I sat down as if clinging on to it, and sat Yoishi there.

“Are you alright?”

“…Ugh.”

“Don’t throw up in here, alright? The toilet’s right over there.”

“…Understood.”

I crossed my arms over the table and stared with a sigh at Yoishi as she lay collapsed on top of it, I then stood up from my seat to buy a drink for the time being.

The restaurant was so crowded on Sunday afternoon that it was a miracle that we were able to get a seat at all. Families with children, happy-looking couples, groups of excited girls. Anyway, the brightly lit restaurant with seating for around 70 or so people was filled to capacity, and everyone was truly enjoying their Sunday afternoon.

It definitely seemed a bit noisy, and it was difficult to carry a conversation without raising one’s voice in this situation -- but I wouldn’t say it was excessive. It would be best to wait here for a while until Yoishi recovered. At any rate, I ordered ice coffee, orange juice and apple pie for the both of us and climbed the stairs to return to my seat on the second floor.

However, when I reached the second floor, I saw Yoishi rise from her seat as she suddenly caught sight of something.

--What the heck is she doing?

As I held the tray and stare at the scene, Yoishi dizzily walks off somewhere. Her gaze was fixed at one point somewhere, shining brightly as if to suggest she had found something unbelievable. Of course, having walked the depths of the world beyond with her up to this point, I had a dreadful premonition. There was no way a ghost disturbance could happen in a fast-food restaurant on such a peaceful Sunday afternoon – but it's Yoishi we're talking about here. It wouldn't be out of the ordinary for anything to happen.

Yoishi kept walking towards somewhere, and eventually bumped into a table with a thud. The three high school boys sitting there went silent all at once. All three had their mouths gaped open halfway as they stared at Yoishi. However, what flummoxed them was not her actions, but rather, her beautiful features.

“Wow, you're so cute.”

“Why are you wearing a uniform on a Sunday?”

“Are you alone?”

They call out to her one after another in a casual tone of voice.

“That uniform is from the Koumei institute? It's a private school, right? We're second years in a government school, but how about you? What year are you?”

The guys who had outrageous hair styles like the main characters of an RPG game continued throwing questions at Yoishi without a care. Ugh, I let out an exasperated groan. They say you can't judge people by their appearances, but you can almost always judge a high school student of this age by their looks. They are probably the so-called "playboys" whose heads are full of this and that of the opposite sex.

“Say, you wanna go to Karaoke?”

The guy in the back, who had his collars opened up way more than

necessary to flaunt off his silver necklace called out to her; I decided to move her away and was about to head over to the seat, when—

“…..Ug…”

“….Huh?”

“…Blaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarrrgghhhh!”

Yoishi sparked all of a sudden. With an imposing stance, she vigorously spewed vomit and excrement containing a mixture of glistening gastric juice and whatever soft drink she had drunk this morning right down on their table.

“Aaaaaaggghhhhhhhh!”

The three of them shouted out as the surrounding clamor quieted down at the same time.

--Oh man, she’s done it now.

I reflexively looked up to the heavens, but it was already too late. The three high schoolers cowered and froze for a moment in front of the half-eaten French Fries covered in Yoishi’s vomit and excrement before immediately scrambling and stumbling their way out of the restaurant.

In the deathly silence of the restaurant, I moved without saying a word. I placed the tray on our seat, grabbed some napkins, and approached Yoishi, who stood stock still.

“Are you alright?”

I wiped the area around Yoishi’s mouth, but she was still staring off somewhere. Sadly, I had already gotten used to the sour smell. I borrowed a table cloth from the employee who had rushed over and skillfully wiped the spilled stomach juices and former soft drink when I came to a realization, ‘Ah, so that’s why’.

It wouldn’t be an exaggeration to say that the age group of the three guys just now, was, in a sense, a mass of sexual desire. Yoishi must

have been bathed in the malice aroused by the sexual desire to take a beautiful girl out somewhere, to do this and that to her and to be happy. I was convinced that that burst the dam of the vomiting phenomenon Yoishi had been holding back – but apparently, that was not the case.

“That girl…”

Eventually, Yoishi weakly pointed somewhere.

She pointed to a girl, still in her upper elementary school years, sitting alone in a four-seater in a corner by the wall.

“That girl? What about her?”

“She has no head.”

“…Huh?”

I looked again at the girl who looked like an elementary school student.

…No, she looks completely normal to me. It’s sounds obvious to say it, but there’s no way a person can exist without a head.

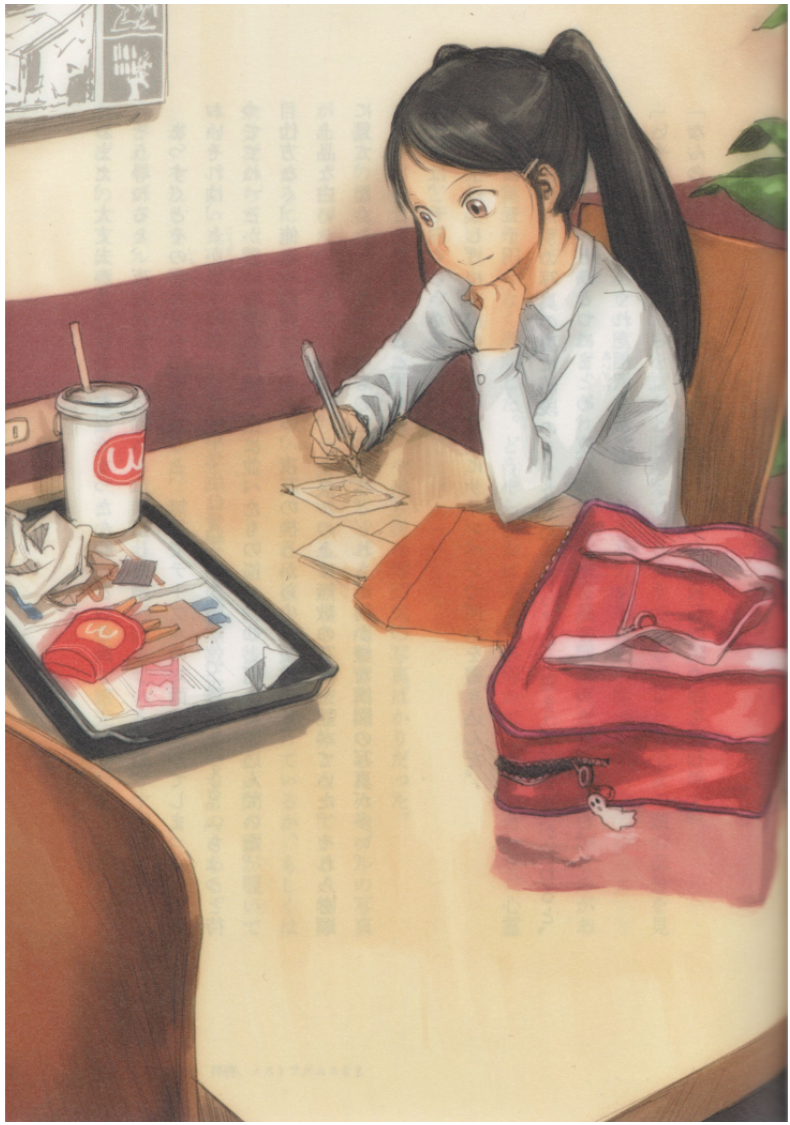
“The girl you’re talking about is the one sitting in the corner seat over there, right? The one wearing a red skirt, white shirt and colorful sneakers, the one who looks a little mature.”

Nodding in agreement, Yoishi gazes at the girl once again – but eventually gives a small shake of the head.

“I can’t see it.”

“….”

Now it was my turn to sink into silence. I turn to gaze at the girl once again, but regardless, she still had a head. I guess they were called ponytails, her long hair was tied at both sides of head, and beneath that was the cute face of a would-be beauty in the near future. She looked cheery as she jotted down something spread out on her desk.



“Are you… feeling alright? Have your eyes gone bad or something?”

Yoishi staggered off once more when asked.

She went straight to the girl's seat and sat down across the table without saying a word.

‘Whoa, wait a second’, I thought to myself – but the school girl

smiled cordially and greeted Yoishi. She was diligently writing on something laid out on her desk, and said something like, “Be right with you in a minute.”

Reluctantly, I headed towards the seat and watched the girl from behind Yoishi.

The girl in the elegant white shirt had countless pictures spread out on the table. Seeing them one by one made me feel cold somehow. All of them had some kind of unpleasant composition.

As I was thinking such things—

“This one is about a thousand yen.”

The girl happily jotted down something on the back of one of the pictures.

“This one is five thousand yen.”

She continued to write what seemed to be a price on the back of another picture. After she finished, she gathered the photos together in a shuffle, then looked at Yoishi, then me, and smiled with a grin.

“Sorry to keep you waiting. Are you the Aizawa-san that sent me a mail?”

“Uh, no… we’re…”

I replied, not knowing what to say; The girl pointed at the seat next to Yoishi.

“It’s fine, have a seat. I’m used to people not using their real names. Which one do you like?”

It seemed the girl had mistaken us for someone else. After taking a glance at Yoishi, who still had her gaze fixed at the girl’s head, I sat down next to her for the time being.

“I have many pictures, all high quality. You see, it’s my policy to sell

only authentic ghost photography.”

I kind of got the gist of things with that statement. She seemed to be an elementary school girl who was meeting customers through the internet or something in order to sell them ghost photos.

“Well then, please choose at your own leisure.”

Saying that, she spread the photos once more, and sure enough, they all had an unpleasant air about them.

There was one with several men and women smiling. One picture of a couple with the sea in the background. Another one with an old man looking at the camera while standing in front of an old dilapidated house. The subjects have black lines plastered over their eyes, possibly because they are missing something, or because they’re superfluous. Arms were completely missing in the middle, or conversely, another person's head was peeking out from the back of the neck. There were pictures with countless white balls of light -- or what were known as orbs.

But Yoishi took one mere glance at them and spoke:

“They're all common phenomena that occur with digital cameras. If you were to move your arm at the moment the photo was taken, it can look like it disappeared. This peeking head is an exposure problem, and these white lights are merely due to a smudge on the lens.”

The girl smiled happily in reply. “You know a lot, onee-san.”

“Sorry. The real thing – it’s only worth showing to those who know the value of it.”

The girl once again took a photo out of her bag, it was bizarre at first glance.

It was set in a rural landscape somewhere. A photograph of five men taken around the entrance to the mountain. Their faces were not obscured by black lines. And, the face of the second man from the left was… stretched as long as a horse. It was stretched out from the top as if it had been twisted by pliers – and yet, he had a broad grin.

“Of course, This person wasn’t deformed or anything, and he normally didn’t look like this. For some reason, only this picture was taken this way. However, a few days after this picture was taken, he died.”

“…”

Yoishi held the picture up, and gazed intently at it.

“Any others?”

“How about this one?”

The next photo she took out was taken in the living room of an old house. It was a tatami room with a table, a sunken hearth, and a chest of drawers. It wasn’t a very large room, but there was a red line running straight down the center of the room. It felt creepy, like blood was dripping down from the ceiling.

“Hmm…”

Yoishi pondered as she gazed at that picture, however, the fact that she wasn’t calling them out as fake creeped me out. I averted my eyes trying not to look at those incomprehensible photos.

“Is this one not to your liking either, Onee-san? you seem to be looking for something hardcore. All right, all right. Then, I’ll have to bring out the ace up my sleeve. However, it's best to be careful with this one."

...Hey, don't tell me there’s still more. As I unconsciously stood up a little, the girl takes out a study notebook from her bag, and from its pages, she takes out another photo wrapped in some kind of thin paraffin paper.

"This is a picture we all took when we played ‘Dear Nos.’"

"Dear Nos?"

"Ah, by ‘Dear Nos’, I mean Kokkuri-san. You summon ‘Dear-Nostradamus-sama’ in the beginning, so it’s shortened to that.”

The girl explained cheerfully, however -- "Kokkuri-san is that, right? A pseudo- séance that occult enthusiasts say should not be performed because It's commonly known that Kokkuri-san rarely appears in actuality, it instead invokes low-grade spirits that wander around the area and cause hauntings. There were various versions of the name, such as 'Angel-sama' or 'Cupid-sama,' depending on the region, but the pattern of writing 'letters,' 'numbers,' 'yes/no,' and drawing a "torii" on a piece of paper, placing a coin on top of it, and asking questions was the same, I thought, but--

But, was it called 'Dear Nos' or something among the elementary school kids of today?

"By Nostradamus-sama, do you mean Dr. Michel de Notre Dame?"

Yoishi inquired, 'As expected', the girl smiled once more.

"But it's different. It's not that fortune teller from the past. Well, that person wasn't originally a fortune teller either, but—calling him Nostradamus-sama makes everyone believe him. Elementary school students really are gullible, after all."

Aren't you an elementary school kid yourself? As my inner voice retorted unconsciously, I saw the picture, and at that moment -- an unpleasant shiver rose from beneath my feet.

It was set in a dimly-lit classroom at sunset. Amidst the rows of desks, a group of girls in their upper elementary school years were facing us. They were probably classmates of the pony-tailed girl in front of me. However, two of the girls had lost their eyes, while the remaining two had twisted, blurred faces. And -- what was it? Something resembling a black mist floated in the air above their heads. As I began to ponder on the black stain, the warning bells began to ring violently inside me with a loud riiiiiiiiiiing. I averted my eyes immediately. Don't think about it-- Don't notice it. This wasn't that kind of thing.

"How was this taken?" Yoishi asked.

"I was the one who took it. It's because I can sense the type of places ghosts are at."

The girl gave an innocent smile.

"Kokkuri-san – you probably know that it's generally a game of low-class ghosts, but the thing that that manifested at that time, was something else. I still don't quite know what it was back then. Some of the girls I did this with are still absent from school."

Yoishi remained silent, but I couldn't bear it anymore and asked:

"And you're okay?"

"I was scared at first, but being afraid doesn't change anything – and don't you think just being afraid is a loss? I know when there's something there. I can aim my camera there. So rather than staying afraid all the time, it would be better to swap the fear for a little money, right?"

"…"

"Say, won't you buy it? I'll give it you for just 10,000 yen, onee-san."

Who would buy such a thing? As I thought that, Yoishi readily nodded, took out a ten thousand yen note from her purse and placed it on top of the table.

"You know when something is there, don't you?"

"…Eh?"

"So, have you noticed the thing next to you?"

I was immediately startled by her words.

The girl was alone, of course. There was no one next to her.

I rose up involuntarily, pushing back the chair behind me which fell down with a thud. I turned around to pick it back up again, only to see that numerous customers were staring at me. A look of alarm, as if to say, 'What are the guys who just caused a vomiting ruckus up to now?'

"I see – Onee-san is a person who can see."

However, regardless of me, the two denpa girls continued their conversation.

“You can only feel them?”

“Yes. I know they’re there, but I can’t see them. What kind of person are they?”

“Their eyes are dark. I think it’s a woman. She's moving her slender hands constantly, fiddling with something.”

I found it unbearable to keep up with their conversation any longer, so I stood up and returned to my previous seat. I put the drinks I had left on the tray – and took a deep breath.

--Ugh, today was supposed to be a date. And yet, why did things turn out like this? It’s a Sunday for most people. A peaceful holiday where the sun is still out, shining warmly, just before the full-blown winter season. I went out in the morning, thinking we should do something fun once in a while, but before I’d realized, my daily life had lurched into occult territory once more. Was this my fault? Did I make some fatal mistake somewhere?

I looked at the seats of Yoishi and the girl, lamenting the absurdity of not knowing who to blame for such a situation, but the girl selling ghost photos was still staring at Yoishi’s face with her lips tightly-knit.

Yoishi, too, stared at the girl’s face, but her gaze barely moved at all, perhaps it was because she still couldn’t see the girl’s face. But – just what the hell did that mean? No matter where I looked from, I could see her face like normal. However, Yoishi, who could see things that were better left unseen, couldn’t see the girl’s face. Yoishi wasn’t the type of person who would lie, so I guess it was true, but – I had no idea what it meant.

Shaking my head, I had no choice but to return to the seat with Yoishi, the pony tailed girl, and the woman with no eyes I couldn’t see.

“Say, won’t you help me?”

The girl asked Yoishi as her voice trailed off.

“Onee-san, you know how to drive this thing away, don’t you?”

The girl who displayed a proud demeanor was there no longer, in her stead, was someone who was scared, as expected for a girl her age. Confused by the complete change, I looked towards Yoishi. However, she was still squinting in the direction of the girl’s face. Why couldn’t she see it? What was this phenomenon? It was like I was a philosopher, struggling with one of life's most difficult questions.

“Onee-san, tell me. What is this? Why is it haunting me? Is it because of this thing that I can tell when a ghost is there?”

“…Who knows?”

Yoishi finally looked away from the girl, and focused her eyes on the ten thousand yen note placed on the table. The movement of her gaze made the girl take notice of the money once more, and she moved to grab it, but – for some reason, Yoishi prevented her from doing so by placing her index finger on the ten thousand yen note.

“If you really want me to drive it away, it’ll cost you fifty thousand yen.”

…Whoa, whoa.

Her remarks made me drop my jaw.

The girl seemed sit stunned for a while, before eventually slipping out a giggle.

“I’m no match for you, onee-san.”

Her expression returned to mature one she had earlier, and spoke:

“Not this time. I'm not really bothered if there's someone next to me, and thanks to that, I can make some extra money.”

Saying that, she picked up the ten thousand yen note from the table, and held out the ‘Dear Nostradamus-sama’ picture in exchange.

“But you’d better be careful, because I think this is really dangerous. if possible, exorcise it properly, or burn it – Ah, maybe you don’t need to worry about such things, onee-san.”

Declaring that, she said, ‘Well, see you’, stuffed the remaining ghost photographs back into her bag, picked up her drink and left. I kept sight of the small girl from behind until she disappeared from sight, and then asked Yoishi, trying my best not to look at the seat next to the girl – in short, the seat where Yoishi had said a woman was.

“Don’t try to extort money from elementary school kids.”

“Why? She was the one trying to peddle ghost photographs to me.”

“Yeah, but fifty thousand yen is too much.”

“I think it’s cheap for a proper exorcism.”

…Well, I guess that might be true. In the first place, I’ve never paid for any exorcisms from my own pocket, and I had no idea how much Krishna-san, the manager of one of Japan's largest occult websites, ‘Ikaigabuchi,’ paid her investigators, or spiritual experts, for their services.

“So, you’ve done exorcisms before, huh?”

Yoishi gave a small shake of the head.

“…Huh? You were gonna charge her fifty thousand yen even though you can’t do it?”

“What happens to her is none of my concern.”

Saying that, Yoishi stood up unsteadily with the ghost photo in her hand.

“Once you have peered into the ‘abyss’, there is no salvation for you.”

“By ‘abyss’, you mean the world beyond? Wasn’t that the dream mansion for me? But you saved me back then.”

I spoke to the figure that was about to head somewhere, and Yoishi

turned to look back.

“You were—”

“Wasn’t the girl really in trouble? She looked like she was about to cry when you told her there was someone besides her, right? She might have had a somewhat cheeky way of speaking, but she's still just in elementary school. Sure, she might be a little eccentric to be peddling ghost photos, but isn’t it natural to lend someone a helping hand if they’re in trouble right before your very eyes?”

Yoishi took a sigh in exasperation in response and spoke:

“You really are such a nice person, after all.”

“What are you on about?”

“There are those in this world you just can’t save, no matter how hard you try.”

“Then, why did you suggest an exorcism?”

Yoishi turned her back to me and spoke:

“I only wanted to confirm it.”

“Confirm what?”

“Confirm whether or not she truly wanted to be rid of it.”

Saying that, Yoishi took the ghost photo in hand to the smoking area separated by a glass window. The smokers inside were all aghast as soon as the uniformed high school girl brazenly walked in – she quickly said something to one of the guys inside, borrowed a lighter, and started burning the picture on the ashtray.

--Ugh… She just paid 10,000 yen for that picture.

I watched the scene in a daze, but when I asked Yoishi after she eventually returned to her seat, she simply replied:

“It wasn’t a good thing to have.”

○

That night, I lay in my futon in the dark room, unable to sleep as I was tossed around by my conflicting doubts.

My thoughts swirled around the ‘abyss’ as Yoishi had called it.

『Once you have peered into the ‘abyss’, there is no salvation for you.』

If I recall correctly, she had said something similar back in the abandoned hospital incident. I had presumed that the ‘abyss’ she mentioned referred to the world beyond -- but that didn’t seem to be the case. I was once saved by her, when she descended to the mansion at the depths of my memory. If she hadn’t done that, I wouldn’t even be here thinking like this. It was a veritable ‘depth of the abyss’[2], for me, a place where I wandered on the border between life and death --- but I wonder if that was even close to what she called ‘the abyss’.

After that, I thought of the elementary school girl I met today. I recall how the imbalance between her indifferent smile and her actions distorted the scene. Ten thousand yen for one ghost photograph, was it? I mean, when I was in elementary school, even five hundred yen was a lot of money. Even the New Year's money I received once a year at New Year's was almost confiscated completely. That’s why it certainly felt wrong for an elementary school kid to meet with adults through the internet to trade ghost photos for tens of thousands of yen. But – kids are kids. They will still have plenty of opportunities to get back on the right path, and I think it’s the role of society and adults to help them do so.

But – on the other hand, a voice inside me asks myself whether that was something that I, a mere half man, should be doing. In other words, it was hard for me, a halfwit, to find an answer even if I thought about it. If I were to run into that elementary school girl again somewhere, I had no concrete idea on what to do.

"…Ugh."

With a sigh, I looked up at the loft where the light was leaking in from.

It seemed Yoishi was still awake. She was clacking away on the laptop she had brought with her. I had no idea what she was up to. She's been at it for a long time now, maybe she's browsing some grotesque NSFW underground websites that make Ikaigabuchi look like mere child's play.

--Trying to rehabilitate her really is impossible, isn't it?

Like Krishna-san had said all along, does that mean a large miracle is required? When I recall the cold words she spoke today, I lose confidence, and at the same time, I get this sick twisted feeling in my stomach. They were probably sound arguments, but I felt they were worthless opinions. They sounded like the kind of thing I would expect to hear from a small, narrow-minded adult, the type of person I despise.

Looking at the light coming from across the loft reminded me of that and irritated me, so I pulled the covers over me and closed my eyes tightly. But that didn't make me sleepy - on the contrary, it made me remember all the more.

If I remember correctly, Yoishi had said that she couldn't see the girl's face. No, actually, that was the beginning of the whole problem. I wonder if she's solved that mystery yet.

In order to confirm that, I threw off the futon, when—

An uncomfortable feeling took hold over me.

The room felt unnaturally dark. No, it was obviously dark with the sole light coming from Yoishi's laptop, but between the light from the loft and my bed, there was another darkness present, an invisible darkness of an unknown nature. Drifting there as if blending in the dim light – it was like a black mist, like black ink stained on a shirt --- I had a feeling, I had seen it before somewhere….

Ahh. I remembered.

It was in the ghost photo which Yoishi was supposed to have burned. The photo of the elementary school kids playing that Kokkuri-san-like game called ‘Dear Nostradamus-Sama’. I'm sure I saw something black like this in that twilight classroom scene.

I closed my eyes tightly. And then slowly opened them. However, it was still there. It wasn’t just my imagination or an optical hallucination. There was definitely something hanging in mid-air in that part of the dimly lit room.

Before I’d realized, the sounds of Yoishi clanking away on her keyboard had disappeared.

The world was deathly silent, absent of all sound.

“…Y, Yoishi.”

I couldn't help but let out that voice, when—

“I know already.”

I heard a voice from the other side of the loft.

“…W-what should I do?”

“Ignore it.”

...I-ignore it? That’s impossible…!

“It’ll disappear eventually.”

How long do you mean by eventually…?

I was about to ask, when I felt that black mist move. Its center wiggled in a vortex, creating a gap in the space. I think I smelled a damp scent wafting from there. An odor I had smelled somewhere before. It seems that smells are sometimes directly connected to memory. Completely disregarding any chronological order, they can suddenly materialize sights and visions seen in the past. That might have been the case this time. That nostalgic fragrance brought back the memory I least wanted to recall.

…Hey, stop it.

Sentimentality is a gap – and the wounds of a broken heart. I was supposed to be standing in my 10 sqm loft apartment, but somehow, I found myself thrown into my mother's room at home.

The frayed tatami mats.

The ingrained scent of mosquito coils.

And standing in front of me, lay the sooty, old fusuma.

It opened slightly ajar once more, and from the darkness beyond, something peeked my way. I bite down on my clattering teeth, and pull the bed covers over my head. It was already over. Everything was over. I would never run back there again. I would live reality. I would plant my feet on the ground, and I would live my life, one step at a time – is what I kept repeating to myself over and over in sheer desperation, but the fusuma door continued to open.

The darkness opens its mouth, and something inside places its hand on the edge of the fusuma.

"…S…stop it, don't come out of there."

But – at that moment.

I felt someone's presence, standing right beside me. As I held my breath, someone touched my shoulder, startling me. They lifted the futon suddenly and slipped into the futon.

"….E, EEEEEK!"

"Be quiet."

It was Yoishi's voice.

I realized her slick, long hair was touching the tip of my nose, and her cold palms were on my back. There was no rubbing, stroking or kind gesture from there on, but the palm of her hand had barely managed to hold back my mind from collapse.

Yoishi's brow was right in front of my lips, and in the darkness, my foolish thoughts drifted to 'Ah, she really does smell like this.' My lower half began to stir sexually for a moment, but what struck me more profoundly was mystery of the life form. Even Yoishi was a lifeform who came into this world through the stomach pains of someone somewhere. Such an obvious fact came rushing towards me as if I had never thought about it before. A feverish body. Shoulders that rise and fall slightly with each breath. And the faint sound of her heartbeat – I match my heartbeat to the heartbeat of Yoishi as a life form. I match my breathing. I slowly breathe in, and exhale deeply; I repeat the process. We became so synchronized in the darkness to the point where it felt as if Yoishi was breathing in the air I breathed out. And that brought me a deep sense of tranquility. It made me feel like I was not alone in this world, it was like it was telling me that I didn't need to suffer all alone.

The next thing I knew, the fear in me had disappeared. As I matched Yoishi's breathing, my eyelids closed silently - and I somehow drifted off into a peaceful, relaxed slumber.

Looking back, I don't know if it was a dream or what.

However, when I woke up the next day, there was no sign of any black stain floating in midair, and Yoishi was asleep in the loft; it was the beginning of just another normal day.

○

It was three days later, on a Wednesday afternoon, that I bumped into that elementary school girl who sold ghost photography.

My university lectures had just finished, and I was walking out the school gates, absentmindedly wondering whether I should kill time at the Beatnik society clubroom in the western building until it was

time for my part-time job, or just hang out at a bookstore... when a voice called out to me.

“Good afternoon.”

I turned my head in the direction of the polite greeting to see the pony-tailed elementary school girl from that fast food restaurant on Sunday, smiling at me with a red school bag on her back.

“I see that Onii-san is also from Koumei High School, Are you a university student?”

I was surprised as I answered her cheerful and friendly manner of speaking.

“Oh, it’s you, kid. So, are you from a school near here?”

“It’s not kid, it’s Akane.”

“Hm?”

“My name is Akane Nanamori. I’m a sixth grader at the first Musashino Elementary School.”

“Is that so – I’m Yamada. Nagito Yamada.”

I stood out like a sore thumb talking to a girl as adorable as a child actor on TV in front of the university gates. Students passing by glared at me like I was some kind of pedophile.

“So, was there something you wanted?”

“Yes, I wanted to meet that Onee-san once more. That black tie and blazer was the Koumei school uniform, right? I think I'll go to this school too. Girls wearing ties is really lovely.”

“I don’t know if it’s what you’d call lovely or not, but, well, the affiliated high school is past these zelkova trees, just down the road.”

Akane smiled once more and said, “That's okay.”

“More importantly, Nagito-san. Do you have some time?”

“Me?”

“I'd like to talk to you a bit more.”

I was a little startled to hear her say that with a big grin on her face. That’s how fearless this girl was. She had the kind of amiability that jumps into the middle of people's hearts without warning.

“Ummm… My part-time job starts at 5.” I spoke. “Well… it’s fine if it’s up until then.”

The two of us briskly made our way to a park in a residential area nearby. It wasn’t particularly a big park with merely a sandbox, swings, and gym bars.

I bought a bottle of orange juice and some canned coffee at the vending machine at the entrance, handed over the orange juice to Akane, and as soon as I sat down on a bench there, was asked:

“Are you going out with that Onee-san?”

“….Hrrrk!”

I had just taken a gulp of coffee, and involuntarily choked at the unexpected question. As I frantically tried to spit out the coffee that had entered my windpipe, Akane spoke happily, flapping her legs back and forth.

“A university student and a high school girl from the affiliated school. It must be nice have a date on a Sunday.”

“…No, that’s not it. That might have been what you’d call a date, but me and Yoishi aren’t going out.”

“Is that so? But when that onee-san vomited in the restaurant, you sure took nice care of her. And you even cleaned up after her properly.”

“Saw that, did you?”

“When you throw up that much, everyone’s bound to see it.”

…Well, that might be the case. I concede as I take another gulp of coffee to calm the cough that had finally subsided.

“But that onee-san is really beautiful, isn’t she?”

“Well, maybe.”

“I was mesmerized by her at first. Her black hair is so silky smooth and beautiful, and she really does look cuter with her straight-cut bangs not covering her eyebrows.”

…Her hair might have looked beautiful now because I was the one washing it every three days, but if left alone, it would become stiff and shaggy in no time. And in the case of her bangs, she cuts them herself, the reason being that it’s troublesome if they cover her eyes.

“Ah, but that might be because of how she is. She’s fair, and has a nice figure, and the black tie really suits her in a gothic style.”

…Well, she might have a nice ass, but her breasts weren’t all that much, and her black tie just looked to me like she was going to funerals every day, wait— What the hell was I thinking? I thought to myself as I saw Akane speak ecstatically, and began to wonder if Yoishi held such appeal.

“Yeah, she looked so nice, and I thought to myself: I want to be like that. And then she suddenly looked my way and threw up with a blarghhh! That really shocked me.”

“She has a habit of spontaneously throwing up.”

“But it seems like she’s been able to see ghosts a lot longer than me, that’s amazing.”

“You’d be better off not being able to see those things.”

“Huh? Is it possible that you can see them too, Naigto-san?”

I replied in the negative and shook my head in response.

“I've seen things that I thought might be like that, but that might have been just my imagination. There is a word called ‘schema’,

which means that even a stain on the ceiling can look like a person's face if you're afraid of it."

Akane's eyes widened in admiration as I arrogantly repeated the second-hand information I had heard from Krishna-san.

"Ooooh, it seems like you've been through a lot, Nagito-san. Tell me, tell me, have you been on many adventures with that onee-san? Next time you go, take me with you."

"No way. It's not what you'd call an adventure anyway. I'm always getting myself dragged into an awful mess."

"…Is that so? At any rate, when that onee-san threw up, you dealt with it so lightning fast, right, Nagito-san? It was like you were born to be a puke janitor."

…Hey!

"I thought that was so sweet of you and what a nice boyfriend you must be. The last time I got sick and threw up outside - I got scolded a lot."

"…Huh?"

Taken aback, I asked her in reply.

"You were scolded… just for throwing up?"

"I guess my mother must have been embarrassed. She was all dressed up that day, and someone throwing up must have been disgusting, right? One time, there was this girl in my class who got sick in class and threw up, and the teacher got very angry."

"No, but that's your own kid's or student's vomit, right? There's nothing wrong with that. Everyone gets sick sometimes. It's a normal reaction of the body trying to get rid of impurities."

Akane reacted with a hmm, and looked at me seriously.

"Nagito-san, you really are a nice person."

“I don’t really think I’m especially nice or anything.”

“Say, is it alright if I ask you something?”

Akane suddenly turned to me and held up one small finger.

“Tell me three words you think of when you hear the word『family』.”

“…Family? Why?”

“Just do it! The things that come to mind immediately. Don’t think!”

She rushed me, waving her hands impatiently; That’s right, she was still in elementary school, I had forgotten that due to her mature manner of speaking. Realizing that fact once more, I decided to go along with her demand.

“I got it. Emmm… three things, was it? First is --『tree』. Second is 『help』.And after that is, uhh…”

When I tried to think of a third word, that dark room suddenly sprang to mind. The word 『Fusuma』filled my head with bitter memories. But I shook my head to get rid of it, and remembered my mother's gentle smile with her eyes partially closed, and spoke:

“『Relief』, I guess.”

Akane looked at me in fascination for a while, and said, “Oh, well.” She seemed to have guessed that I had replaced that last word in the end, I squirmed uncomfortably on the bench before repositioning myself and asked:

“So, what's this all about?”

“What do you mean by ‘tree’?”

“Ah, I guess I said that because my family’s in the lumber business.”

“Oh, I see. So the ‘help’ you spoke of next referred to helping out your family with their work since you were a child. Then we come to the ‘relief’ you mentioned. That one alone seemed somewhat

artificial, but, it's fine, I'll let it pass. I'm sure the real answer lies within Nagito-san's heart."

"….Oof."

"You see, the order of these word associations is supposed to go from 'pleasant' to 'unpleasant'. In short, the most positive image of the family first comes to mind, followed by the most negative. Of course, there are children who think of negative words first. Like me."

"…What did you think of?"

"Hell, Cleaning – Maze."

Akane spoke those words, and grinned once more.

But this time, the smile was lonely, resembling a lost child desperately trying to find the place they belonged.

"Say." I asked: "Why 'Kokkuri-san' – or was it 'Dear Nostradamus-sama'? Why were you playing something like that? Were you searching for something?"

"Nothing, really."

Akane spoke with indifference, as she swung both legs back and forth.

"Nothing? Then don't do it. Nothing good comes from playing 'Kokkuri-san'."

"I know. But I was told in class that there are no such things as ghosts. They called me a liar. That's why I had to prove it. There are many things that elementary school kids have to deal with."

"…."

As I gazed at her lonely profile from the side—

Well, that's true, I was convinced. When I think about it now, something like cliques existed in my elementary school years. There was definitely a world of children, A place that existed in the absence

of adults.

“Then, were you able to prove it?”

“Yeah, they stopped calling me a liar.”

“…Is that so?”

“But…”

“…Hm?”

“They're all afraid of me now.”

Suddenly –

As she muttered that, Akane’s profile became perfectly transparent. I reflexively rubbed my eyes and looked once more. Her skin, her capillary vessels dissolved in the air, only the faint vestiges of the elementary school student known as Akane Nanamori remained—

I found myself reaching out with my fingertips and poking Akane a little on the cheek with a plop.

“Whaa…?”

“Ah, sorry.”

“…Y-Yamada-san, Nagito-san, are you a pervert? You prefer little girls?”

“NO! It just looked like you were about to disappear. I mean, it really did.”

“I won’t disappear! I’m not about to!”

“My bad. Sorry. No, you know Yoishi said— I mean that high school girl from the other day, she said she couldn't see your head, or something like that, so maybe I just felt that way.”

“…That onee-san said that?”

Akane then nodded in a strangely impressed manner and hesitated

for a moment before asking.

“Say, is it alright if I ask you something?”

“…Hm?”

“That onee-san, is she dead? Did she die once somewhere?”

“…What?”

“I can tell. People like her. Because they’re cut off. Their body and soul.”

“Umm, well…actually…”

With my hands on my knees, I decided to ask her. I don’t know if it was something prudent to ask an elementary school kid, but I wanted to know the opinion of a person involved with the world beyond, whether it was an elementary school kid or a girl, no matter how trivial their opinion was.

“Do you think a person like that can be saved?”

“…Saved?”

“Ah, by saved, I don’t mean to sound outlandish or anything, I just wanna know if you can help them smile and go on with their lives?”

Akane started her answer with "I don't know, but..." and continued.

“I don’t think it's a problem that Nagito-san can do anything about.”

“What do you mean?”

“Unless that onee-san wants to be saved, it’s not going to happen.”

Frustrated, I ruffled my hair, and spoke:

“That’s the thing I can never be sure of. Is she giving me a sign that she wants to come back? If she really had no attachments to this world, she would have died long before I could do anything about it. But I can't help but feel that her attraction to the occult is a different

kind of impulse. I don't think someone's eyes shine like that when they're rushing to their death."

"Aah—"

Akane gave a mature smile in response and replied:

"She might just be… giving it a try."

"A try?"

When I asked her that, Akane said 'Yeah', and gave a lonely smile in response.

"Because I'm the same."

○

Eyelids are such a marvelous thing: a thin piece of skin that separates your eyes from the world.

Without them, how restless of a world would people have to live in? When a person is tired, when they want to think things through without any obstructions, and when they end up face to face with things they don't want to see – they are truly a reliable shield. A trustworthy partner that provides hearts and minds a brief shelter from the cruel realities that draw close without mercy. But nowadays, eyebrows are being treated rather unfairly by those who complain about their eyebrows swell up on some days, or those who wish they had double eyelids. To them, the eyebrows should have a thing or two to say: I am your shield, the last fortification that moistens your eyeballs, prevents impurities from entering, and maintains your peace. Only the warm rays of the sun are allowed to penetrate gently, but that is because of the sun's greatness—

I wake up every morning with this thought in my head, but on this particular day, the sun was a bit too strong. Regardless of how thin and cheap the curtains in my room were, wasn't the light from the sun a little too strong?

Could it be that I'd forgotten to close the curtains before I slept? I wondered while rubbing my doozy eyes as I woke up, when I found two legs straddling me.

As I look up from the navy blue socks, I am struck by the curves of the white thighs and see -- a short black skirt. The exposed skin between the top of the knee high socks and the hemline of the skirt were perfectly formed, and though the undergarments weren't visible, the chain of the white blouse, black tie and black blazer were of the distinctive Koumei high school uniform.

"It's eight o' clock."

The sunlight bounced off the long, black hair from her shoulders, Yoishi looked down on me for some reason as she spoke.

"Let's go on a date."

"…Huh?"

"Since It was ruined midway through the other day."

Yoishi said that as she tried to throw off the futon, I panicked and tried to stop her.

Hey, isn't this development a complete reversal from always?? I was always the one fighting to wake her up after she had spent all night surfing the net, made her wash her face, made her eat, and if the situation called for it, strapped her to the back of my mama bike so that we could ride together to school.

"A date--? Isn't it a weekday? What are you gonna do about school?"

"There are countless things in the world more important than school."

She spoke with a serious expression on her face, making me feel it was useless to try and argue with her.

It couldn't be helped, I thought to myself, as I grabbed a fresh pair of pants and shirts before heading in to the unit bath to change. There, I suddenly remembered, opened the door a little and spoke my mind.

“Say, it’s about that girl, the one who was selling the ghost photographs. Can’t you help her somehow? I ran into her the other day and had little chat, she’s not a bad kid.”

“You met her? Where?”

“She was hanging outside the university. So, I talked to her for a bit.”

“…”

“Anyways, it seems she was called a liar in class, so she tried to rebut them by playing ‘Kokkuri-san’ or something.”

However, Yoishi didn’t answer at all. I finished changing my clothes, and washed my face, applied water to my disheveled hair and fixed it up a bit, and when I came out of the bath, I saw her with her hands on her lips, lost in thought.

“Hey, Yoishi.”

Yoishi looked at me in a daze after I called out to her, and she spoke.

“Anyway, let’s go on a date.”

However, even though she said that, the place she took me to was the second district of Musashino’s Kichijoji Honcho, in short, the Koumei institute as usual. And moreover, it was the Beatnik research society club room in the western club building. It was, in a nutshell, the headquarters of the occult website ‘Ikaigabuchi’.

“W…why are you two here together so early?”

Shiina Kurimoto, aka Krishna-san, the leader and representative of ‘Ikaigabuchi’, with a baby face that looked like a middle school student, and owner of a voluptuous bust, asked us in astonishment, But I was befuddled as well. I had no idea how this qualified as a date, nor the reason why Yoishi had suddenly dragged me out here.

“Let us play ‘Kokkuri-san’ here.”

In response to Yoishi's abrupt demand, both Krishna-san and I dropped our jaws at the same time.

"K…Kokkuri-san?"

I ask in return, and Yoishi nods in silence.

Krishna-san, who was using a computer on the work table, raised her trademark red glasses with her middle finger, and answered firmly:

"No. You know what 'Kokkuri-san' is, don't you?"

"Yes—'Kokkuri-san' is what is known as a Ouija board in the west, a pseudo- séance that sometimes causes mass hysteria. Most of them are a kind of automatic writing caused by one of the members involved deliberately directing the movements, or by the involuntary muscular movements of the fingers, or through hypnotic states; but sometimes, they are prone to dangerous interference by low-level spirits."

"If you know that much, then you know it's not something I'll allow."

"This 'Kokkuri-san' will be a little different, and it might affect this person."

Saying that, Yoishi grabbed me by the sleeve of my clothes.

"I may not be able to save him, so I'll keep you as insurance."

……No, I didn't ask you anything about danger or insurance.

As I'm left dumbfounded, Krishna-san asks:

"What do you mean by insurance?"

"You know specialists who deal in exorcisms, correct?"

Yoishi spoke with a blank expression, causing Krishna-san to frantically grimace back in protest.

"They don't have the time to get involved in such things. In the first place, they are lending us their help because they agree with

Ikaigabuchi's aim of promoting the segregation of ghosts and people. As long as it's not something urgent or of social significance..."

"This is one of the dangers that's spreading now here in Musashino."

Krishna-san went silent after hearing that.

"…What do you mean?"

"A pseudo séance known as 'Dear Nostradamus-sama' is beginning to become something of a fad among elementary school students; It doesn't just summon any low-level ghost, but rather, a specific wandering ghost."

○

A light-blocking curtain is an amazing thing.

When used, it gives a strange feeling of airtight closure, creating an otherworldly space. And the curtains in the Beatnik research room were excellent at blocking out the light, unlike the ones in my apartment. Originally, this place was intended to be used to verify archive footage, but the moment the drapes were drawn, it became so dark it was hard to believe that it was almost 9 AM, even blocking out the noise outside the window, leaving the room in complete silence.

In the dark room, Yoishi set up a candle she had brought in preparation in the middle of the round table. She then moved four chairs and arranged them around the table. There was one more seat than the number of participants, but it seemed that was part of this particular 'Kokkuri-san'.

As me and Krishna-san sat around the table, Yoishi took out a scrap of paper of some kind from her pocket. When opened, I saw that it had the Japanese syllabary, numbers, a yes-no, and instead of a torii, it had a hexagram, the so-called Star of David, a six-pointed star with triangles crossing upside down - scrawled on it.

After all arrangements had been made, Yoishi sat down as well. She then proceeded to place an engraved ten-yen coin from the Shōwa era in the center of the paper and placed her own index finger on top of it.[3]

“Let’s begin.”

Spurred on by Yoishi, Krishna-san and I had no choice but to follow her lead, and we both placed our index fingers on the coin. After a deep breath, Yoishi began to speak.

“Dear Nostradamus-sama -- Thou who art linked to the gate of the swirling spiral, who art uninvited by fate, please preach to us with wandering Kotodama.”

Those appeared to be the words Yoishi had researched over the past few days by digging through the internet and visiting Akane’s elementary school.

“Those are some shady sentences.” I spoke.

“I believe the words don’t mean anything.” Yoishi whispered in reply. “What’s important is that they, on the other side, know they are being summoned.”

“Who do you mean by ‘they’?”

When I asked, Yoishi’s fair, well-shaped face, illuminated by the flickering candle-light, seemed to smile enchantingly. However, that gaze lingered on the seat in front of me – the empty one between Krishna-san and Yoishi, causing me to shudder in fear.

“Dear Nostradamus-sama -- Nostradamus-sama. Please appear here, preach to us the path with the wandering kotodama.”

As Yoishi continued to repeat those words in a low key tone of voice, it felt like the club room alone was being isolated from the world around it. It did become considerably colder recently, but the dry air had changed into something slimy – or should I say, the atmosphere of the room had become muddy, as if something cold and creeping began to hang at my feet.

However – Nothing was happening, was it?

As I was about to say that out loud…

With a thud, someone banged on the window from outside, startling me.

Krishna-san and I froze in place. The reason being that the Beatnik research society was located on the third floor. There was no way someone could have banged the window. It must have been hit by a ball or something. I wanted to make sure, but I couldn't take my hand off the ten-yen coin, so I stayed where I was.

Suddenly, I felt someone's presence cross directly behind me, and yet, I couldn't dare look behind me in the fear I would witness something unpleasant. On the other hand, I was afraid to look at the empty seat in front of me. Krishna-san being right next to me was a source of comfort, but the fact that she herself remained silent also scared me.

I came to realize that Yoishi's mouth movements, which were repeatedly chanting the incantations with her eyes half-open, had ceased.

In the concrete clubroom, silence alone, was deafening.

The candle continues to flicker and sway, and I wondered…

…Wasn't it strange? The other side of the window which was abuzz a moment ago, had fallen silent… No—there was a sound. I didn't know how to describe it; it was like something was ringing in my ears. Like an uughh… or an ughoo… a muffled sound, like hearing someone's voice underwater.

"---It's here."

It was the moment of Yoishi's low whisper.

My finger moved with a twitch, and instantly, a cold sweat ran down my spine.

The ten-yen coin beneath my finger – was moving. No one was putting power into their fingers, and yet, the ten-yen coin twitched and wriggled as if it were a living thing.

"Don't lift your fingers under any circumstances."

Krishna-san nodded nervously at Yoishi's request, and I nodded back, holding back the tears in my eyes.

“Is this Nostradamus-sama?”

In reply to Yoishi’s question – there was silence at first.

Eventually, the ten-yen coin began to move sluggishly and stopped when it reached the position of ‘Yes’.

“I have a question.”

In reply, the fingers started moving again as if they were being dragged by the ten-yen coin – However, this time they stopped at ‘No’.

--No? Does that mean questions aren’t allowed?

Isn’t asking questions the main part of ‘Kokkuri-san’?

“I'd like you to tell me something.”

Yoishi asked once more, however, the ten-yen coin stayed firmly planted on ‘No’.

“Are questions not allowed?”

In response, it began to move once more. With a dragging sound, the ten-yen coin shifts sideways and stops at the position of ‘Yes’.

Is this what Yoishi meant when she said this Kokkuri-san would be a little different?

“Well then, can you do anything?”

The ten-yen coin stayed motionless for a while. Eventually, as if dragging and oscillating, it stopped at some letters, and moved, again and again.

『D』 『I』 『S』 『A』 『P』 『P』 『E』 『A』 『R』

“Is that about making someone disappear?”

In reply to Yoishi's query, the ten-yen coin… moved to 'Yes'.

--Making someone disappear, it can't be.

"Does that mean – to kill someone?"

With a twitch, the ten-yen coin moved and slowly swayed at 'Yes'.

My fingertips were now frozen stiff, and my palms were completely drenched in sweat. My eyes were glued to the ten-yen coin in front of me, to the point where I might inadvertently forget to breathe. Was this what you'd call a prank from of a low-class ghost--?

No, I recall what Akane had told me before.

She said she played this in order prove she wasn't a liar. As a result, she became feared. Yoishi had said that 'a specific wandering ghost is summoned'—which meant…no way. Did she actually end up summoning a real 'God of Death'?

"Understood. Those were all the questions I had. Please return."

However, Yoishi spoke that with her usual expression.

But—

With a rustle, the ten-yen coin moves to 'No'.

"Please return."

The ten-yen coin stayed firmly put at 'No'.

Even though this was a predictable development in 'Kokkuri-san' type ghost stories, actually witnessing the phenomenon of involuntary return first-hand made me realize I would have panicked if I were doing it alone.

『D』 『I』 『S』 『A』 『P』 『P』 『E』 『A』 『R』

『N』 『A』 『M』 『E』

Haa…haa….haaa…haa….

The ten-yen coin moves – and forms meaning. My breathing becomes ragged as I comprehend the words.

“So does that mean you won’t go back until you’ve made someone disappear?”

Yoishi asked in a clear tone, and the ten-yen coin drags towards ‘Yes’.

--Oooooh, Oi, what are we going to do?

In tears, I glance at Yoishi, then Krishna-san. I could see the sweat appear on Krishna-san’s forehead. Her lips were pursed tightly together, and she had at some point, taken her phone out with one hand. In all likelihood, she had looked up the specialists over at ‘Ikaigabuchi’ on her phone, her finger one button-press away from dialing their number.

However—at that moment.

“Well then—”

Yoishi spoke the words I could never have imagined.

“Well then, please make me disappear.”

……

The ten-yen coin did not answer. Could that be because it was the first time this summoned entity had heard such a request? I felt a hint of something confused.

“—Stop it.”

The moment Krishna-san spoke that out loud—

…’Yes’.

The ten-yen coin under my finger formed a small arc on that spot.

I looked up in shock and saw that a black mist had been hanging over our heads for who knows how long.

Yoishi's long black hair ruffles softly as it slowly sinks into darkness. Seeing that made my body feel an imaginary floating sensation. In the midst of the silence, as if time had stopped – Yoishi merely wore an expression of ecstasy. To be honest, I had no idea what had happened to Yoishi. I noticed more darkness spreading out from the darkness, and before long, the black mist expanded wide enough to envelop the upper half of Yoishi's body.

"….Hey….Wait a minute…."

The mist continued to enshroud Yoishi. Her face -- her upper body, along with her arms outstretched towards somewhere else, they all continued to disappear.

"Nagi-kun, no!"

Krishna-san's scream reached my ears, but I had already taken my finger off of the ten-yen coin. I stood up with enough force to throw off my chair and clung to Yoishi's body, which was enveloped by the black stain-like substance.

"Hey, Yoishi! Stop messing around!"

However, the moment I embraced Yoishi's soft body with both hands, a horrifying chill closed in on me. That was being transmitted through Yoishi's body to me, and its root was – Yoishi's outstretched hands, in short, something present inside the mist.

I saw –Yoishi's outstretched arms, suspended in midair. I saw the thing her white hands were grasping.

It was black. Black and soft – threaded like someone's hair. Yoishi grasped it, as if putting her hand on its roots. And she pulled it out from the darkness. Without any mercy to the other side's resistance, she dragged it over to this side. However – I couldn't see anything. There was nothing in Yoishi's hands. But for some reason, perhaps because of the way it was held as if it were wrapped in both hands, I

couldn’t help but be reminded of a human head, and I thought I could hear the sound of a child crying out somewhere.

“Go back.”

Yoishi spoke as she pulled with all her might on what resembled a human head in her hands.

“There’s nothing left for you to consume.”

In the darkness -- did I hallucinate?

I felt I saw Akane Nanamori's head in Yoishi’s hands.

In mid-air, her pretty face was disfigured in a disheveled mess, and she was crying.

“You’re mistaken.”

And with those parting words –

Yoishi Mitsurugi collapsed audibly in front of my eyes.

○

“What on earth is going on, Nagi-kun?”

After informing the driver of the destination, that was the first thing Krishna-san asked after the taxi started moving.

“Ummm… where should I begin?”

Supporting the unconscious Yoishi with my right arm and feeling exhausted, I explained the events that had transpired thus far.

I told her about the girl selling ghost photographs in the fast-food restaurant. The fact that Yoishi had said she couldn't see her head. And about the photo of 'Dear Nostradamus-sama', the ‘slightly different Kokkuri-san' that the girl said was real. How Akane and her

friends played it and the unfortunate result, etcetera, etcetera.

“…..Sigh. So that’s what it was.”

Sitting in the passenger seat, Krishna-san breathed a deep sigh after she had finished listening to everything.

“No, I don’t understand any of it…. Just what did it all mean?”

Krishna-san pushed up her red glasses, which had slid down at some point, with her middle finger and spoke:

“In all likelihood, that girl has a knack for conscious out-of-body experiences.”

“Out-of-body… experiences?”

“That’s right, an ‘Astral projection’, so to speak. Recently, methods of intentionally separating the soul have been circulating on the internet, and if that girl uses the internet, it's not surprising that she knows about them.”

“Ahh, now that you mention it.”

I’d also read a thread on ‘Out-of-body experiences’. But if I recall, in the end, no definitive method was ever worked out, and only a few enthusiasts remained after being certified as trolls.

“That’s right. An out-of-body experience isn’t something anyone can easily do, and it is difficult to distinguish from self-hypnosis and lucid dreaming. In general, when it comes to self-hypnosis, it’s very dangerous for a novice to perform these experiments alone, in the absence of a person to dispel their hypnotic state. It depends a lot on the aptitude of the individual and should never be done willingly – I suspect that child did have that aptitude. I believe she's one of those kids who could do it anywhere at will to some extent.”

“Huh? Then, the Nostradamus-sama from a while ago was, in other words…”

“Yes, that child herself.”

Ah—

Exhausted, I finally understood. That's what she meant when she said she had been called a liar and had to prove herself.

But…Wait a second. Then does that mean that black mist which turned up at my apartment that night was also Akane? Did she come to check our state of affairs? But – if that's the case, then something doesn't add up.

"…Um, Krishna-san. If that thing from before really was Akane herself, and if she is a kid who can do astral projections, then who was the one who took those ghost photographs she had? Could you press the shutter of a camera even if your soul was detached?"

"That girl was able to shift her soul slightly."

As I tilted my head in befuddlement, Krishna-san shaped her small finger like a knife and held them against her neck.

"She must be a child who can detach only from the neck above like this and peer into the spirit world."

"…Ah."

I see. So that's how it was.

"She has no head." "I can't see it."

Yoishi had said so in the fast-food restaurant. So that was, in short, because Akane had left her head on the other side?

"In short, the child could have peeked into the world where the dead roam when she used her astral projection and identified their location."

"But – But, if I recall correctly, Akane told me she couldn't see them, only know they were there."

"We who cannot see it can only imagine what kind of world it is. I told you once before that I used to recognize people by their auras when I was a child, but people were just a blur of light, and I couldn't

even tell whether it was the living or the dead I was seeing. However, it is highly likely that my teacher Takita-san and Yoishi can see them more clearly. From there, it's a matter of individual disposition -- but it's possible that only the head of the girl which went to the other side in spirit form did not return."

….Aah, I see.

I understood the Akane's situation – but if that was the case, did that mean that Yoishi normally saw people in their spiritual form rather than their physical bodies? Is she always in daze because her mind can't cope with looking at their every detail, and whether willingly or unwillingly, she throws up when she sees something incomprehensible? Hey, hey, hey, what kind of world does she usually see……?

I felt goosebumps in my arms, and rubbed them, when—

"To put it frankly…"

Krishna-san added as she scratched her bobbed hair.

"No one knows anything about the world beyond."

"…Huh?"

"For conveniences' sake, the world is divided into this world and the next. Since time immemorial, It is merely something devised by the living out of a sense of regret for the dead. For those who believe in it, the afterlife does exist, and for those who don't, it's a fairy tale. But for example -- hmm, yes, it's easier to understand if you think of the deep sea, thousands of meters below the surface. Only a tiny percent of the world and the ecosystems that exist down there have been established. For some scientists, it's a world filled with even more mysteries than Mars. We know next to nothing, but we do know that there is life in the depths of the sea. And if we were to liken highly trained psychics to divers, they can only dive a few dozen meters into the shallows at most. As for what lurks thousands of meters under the sea, no one knows."

Hearing that—

I suddenly recalled the scene I saw one day when I went to visit a remote island with my father. I remember feeling horrified seeing the color of the open sea from the ferry. On that sea, I clearly saw the moment when its color changed from blue to black. I later learnt that it was from that point, that the Suruga Trough began, but I was terrified at the time, feeling as if hell was opening its mouth. It was the first experience that made me realize that there was a world right there in this world that I could never enter, even if it took me a lifetime.

“One of the biggest reasons astral projections are considered dangerous is because there are cases where repeating them can weaken the connection between body and soul.”

Krishna-san continued speaking quietly.

“For that girl, it may have been like holding her breath and picking up a pretty marble from the bottom of a swimming pool just for the fun of it. However, after carelessly repeating out-of-body experiences, she might have become constantly out of phase, and then, perhaps – her head ended up disappearing from the neck up.”

“Is… Akane alright now?”

“I don’t know.” Sighed Krishna-san.

“In the end, it’s always a problem on our side. Around evening time, a few friends gather around a peculiar piece of paper. They address things that aren’t supposed to be there. Then three or more people put their fingers on a ten-yen coin. Ordinary people would have doubts at the onset about the ‘maybe’ in this situation. If you start believing even 1% of the time, that’s when the paranormal comes into play. In other words, what makes ‘Kokkuri-san’ so dangerous is that it is a form of séance that leads to a state of mind that is easy to connect with. From a probabilistic point of view, it's usually stranger that the ten-yen coin doesn't move. Everyone tries to move it in one direction or the other and immediately gives up on the direction in which it doesn't move, but sometimes the direction of movement just happens to match. It feels as if it moved regardless of one's intention. At that moment, the probability of paranormal existence jumps up in the mind of that person. Therefore, it is best not to play ‘Kokkuri-san’

if you are apt to believe in it -- And the real problem is the human mind that starts to think about playing games like 'Kokkuri-san'.”

Krishna-san's voice, which had gotten louder at some point, startled the taxi driver – but I recalled something. Three words Akane had mentioned regarding ‘family’.

Those were ‘hell’, ‘cleaning’ and ‘maze’.

She said the first word that comes to mind was ‘pleasant’, and the last word was ‘unpleasant’ -- What was life like for an elementary schoolchild who’s first thought when she hears of ‘home’ to be ‘prison’? Somewhere originally meant to be a place of safety to rest your body and mind, what would compel someone to feel as if it were a place to be lost and search for an exit?

“Children follow and believe their parents as though they are the only absolute God.”

Krishna continued to speak sadly.

“Whether that is right or wrong, it’s not something they can decide, as they only have an extremely narrow set of morals. I would like to hope the adults around her handle things wisely, but— from this point onwards, we're stepping into private territory, and that's not something an outsider can carelessly intrude into based on speculations, so it’s difficult. There are some things in this world that can't be dealt with by effort alone.”

Oddly enough – Yoishi said the same thing in the fast-food restaurant.

I've certainly witnessed parents beating their children badly on the street. I’m always confused about whether to stop them, or to overlook it. I wonder if that’s going too far as a part of their upbringing, but then I end up thinking that just might be my point of view because I’m not the parent. Maybe I'll understand that one day when I become a parent. Maybe the parents who beat their children are the ones crying on the inside. That’s what I hope – but, no matter how much I think on it, as I am now, I wouldn’t know.

“Well then, now it’s my turn to ask the questions.”

Suddenly hearing that voice, I look up to see Krishna-san turning towards me.

“Why is this taxi heading towards your house?”

“…Huh?”

“Why is this taxi, meant to be heading to Yoishi’s house, headed to your apartment? I have been wondering about this for a while now.”

…Oh no.

I was in a hurry and gave the driver my home address without thinking about it – it sounds extremely suspicious for sure. Sweat trickled down my clothes and I gently looked at Krishna's face. The petite, baby-faced occult website manager frowned, and her large eyes behind her red glasses glittered with a light that would not allow any lies.

“U…ummm…”

If I had lied at this point and said it was because I didn't know where she lived, things might have turned out fine.

But I wasn’t good at lying, and if the truth did come out some day, then this person’s trust in me – assuming she still had any left — would be lost to the very core. She would never take my words at face value ever again. I didn't want that.

“Uh… Actually.”

I started from the beginning. How Yoishi had crashed into my apartment for almost a month now, bringing along nothing more than a single bag. How I had been struggling with Yoishi, who was parasitizing in my loft and who ate, slept, bathed and lived wrong in every way, and that a lot had happened during that time and that I had finally decided on the ‘Yoishi Mitsurugi Rehabilitation Plan’.

After I had told her everything:

“…In short, right after the incident with Takamura-san?” Krishna-san asked, dumbfounded.

“It’s already been a month… under the same roof?”

I nodded quietly.

Krishna-san let out a deep, deep sigh as she sunk in her seat.

For a while, only silence filled the interior of the car, and I felt the taxi driver's ears were becoming like Dumbo. It was really awkward.

“Ever since I first met you – we haven’t seen eye to eye on this.”

Krishna-san eventually muttered.

“I keep telling you it’s impossible to bring Yoishi back to this side, and you stubbornly continue to try, always putting yourself in danger.”

“……..”

“And it’s already becoming your life. I’m sure that determination was already solidified when you recently jumped off the roof of the school building.”

The fact that her voice did not contain anger, but more like she was letting loose, had the opposite effect of making my conscience ache.

“I’m sorry.”

When I apologized, Krishna-san spat out that it was nothing to apologize for.

“It’s not something to apologize for – but, there’s nothing much a girl can do when a boy has decided to do something, and that makes me a little sad.”

Hearing that timid line made me feel a deep sense of guilt and remorse, and I lowered my head. I suddenly felt a gaze and looked up and caught the eye of the taxi driver looking in the rear-view mirror. For some reason, I felt the taxi driver was saying this with warm,

wrinkled eyes:

-- I'm glad you've met a nice woman, kid.

Did he mean Krishna-san – or was it this paranormal high school girl who was leaning over like a corpse beside me with her long black hair covering her face?

I had no idea.

○

"Things can't go on like this forever, I'll try to come up with something as well."

After helping me put Yoishi on my futon downstairs, Krishna-san said this and left.

"However, in the unlikely event that you do something strange or indecent to Yoishi – I will never ever *ever* talk to you again! I'll revile you for the rest of my life -- no, for the next seven generations!"

She yelled out loud while blushing just as the door closed.

I wouldn't do something like that – or rather, was she really going to live seven generations beyond my time, I thought exasperatedly as I saw her off.

It was still just past noon, and bright outside.

I absentmindedly gazed at the light pouring in from the window and realized that, in the end, Yoishi didn't go to school today. She'll probably end up being marked absent without reason.

In the first place, how did she explain her parasitizing in my loft to the school? The fundamental question is, where the hell are her parents? Tuition fees for private schools don't come cheap, so who the hell is paying for her? The girl who was shrouded in all that mystery was right now comfortably asleep next to me. Seeing her

eyes closed with a strangely cute expression on her face, it was as if she was replenishing the sleep deprivation caused by staying online until dawn, rather than collapsing from extreme mental fatigue, and that started to piss me off. I glared at her fair, well-formed face – but then I thought…

In the end, didn't she manage to save that girl? Before, she said something like 'What happens to her is none of my concern', but at that time, the thing Yoishi had dragged out from that black mist-like thing was the head of that girl that hadn't returned.

"It's definitely not what I would call the smartest way of doing things, but this girl does turn up to help in the end."

It was right when I said it—

"…That's not it."

Her long eyelashes twitched, and Yoishi opened her large eyes.

"Huh, you woke up? What are you talking about?"

I called out to her, and Yoishi replied with a dazed expression:

"I didn't help anyone. That's not something I can do. I was just curious about why that girl's head was missing."

….Ah.

I was relieved thinking that everything had been resolved amicably, but there were still a lot of things left I didn't understand. Yoishi threw up abruptly at that fast-food restaurant that time. I don't know if it was a ghost or malice that made her throw up, but it was because she felt something incredibly horrific there. Besides that, Akane Nanamori also said that when she pawned off that photo to Yoishi. That this photo was really dangerous.

"But what a pity."

Yoishi spoke while looking up at the ceiling.

"That girl, doesn't have long to live."

Her stilted speech, painted my world dark.

“….D, doesn’t have long to live? What do you mean?”

“Combined with what you heard, the girl’s classmates doubted she could sense places where ghosts wandered and take their photos. And to prove that, she used Kokkuri-san. She probably summoned herself by herself.”

“Ah, I understand that much. So, the astral projected head of hers didn’t return, right? Then didn’t you pull something out of that misty thing? Wasn’t it her?”

Yoishi quietly shook her head.

“I couldn't see her head from the beginning, nor could I see a ring of light or anything that resembled a guardian spirit. This was very unusual. There's usually more than one entity standing over everyone's shoulder -- Did it already escape? Or was it consumed? -- There was nothing on that child's shoulder.”

“Oooo, Oi, consumed?”

…No, that was it. When we were playing ‘Kokkuri-san’, it was the last thing Yoishi said. ‘There’s nothing left for you to consume’. Who… was consuming what, exactly? If that wasn’t Akane, then what on earth was Yoishi talking to?

But then – I remembered.

Come to think of it, what was that woman sitting next to Akane in the fast-food restaurant? Yoishi had described her as a woman with dark eyes who was fiddling with something….

“Y-Yoishi…. What… did you see?”

I ask, opening my parched throat.

“What was the ghost of the woman you saw sitting next to Akane in the restaurant?”

“I called it a woman for convenience’s sake – but, that wasn’t entirely

accurate. It’s face definitely resembled that of a woman. It had slender arms, but the torso was long and thin, stretching like a snake into the darkness beyond. Sometimes it comes floating up from somewhere at great speed and eats whatever is there. I believe it's using that 'Dear Nostradamus' as an entrance now.”

“…W, wh, what the hell is that monster? Why the heck did it suddenly appear?”

“In all likelihood, the hexagram used in ‘Dear Nos' is to blame. It’s the Star of David in the West, but - in this island country, it's more like a Kagome crest. It's an old belief in places like Shinshu. Kagome points to a 'Curse God'.[4]"

“…C-curse God?”

“I’ve seen them several times before. But I didn’t know what that was. I tried to get that girl’s head back, but that was impossible. Maybe it’s not something possible for a human being to do”.

Those decisively hollow words… made my skin crawl.

I can feel the presence of something other than me and Yoishi in this room, something else was creeping in.

“As that child continued her astral projections, she ended up being marked. It’s often said that an astral projection is dangerous because it weakens the connection between body and soul, but that’s not the only reason. If something unfamiliar wanders aimlessly in front of you, then the things nestled in the 'abyss' will take an interest.”

After that, Yoishi gazed at me with her glass bead eyes, and spoke.

“You often ask me what I see. You ask me what the world beyond is like, but even I don’t understand it well. However – right now, I recalled something awfully similar.”

“That is…?”

“The sea at night. The dark, black – sea.”

“….”

“It’s too dark to see what lies out there. It’s so vast and so deep that it’s enough to overwhelm you. If you’re lucky, you might catch a glimpse of something peeking out of the water, but what that is and where it came from is something no one will tell you, and it’s not something one can know as long as they are alive.”

Those words made me recall Krishna-san’s words once more—

Before I’d realized, the dark sea appeared before my eyes. The rough sound of the crashing waves was right up close to my ears. I recalled the fear of being dragged in, of something huge staring back at me.

“S…say, Yoishi. If Akane had peeked in the ‘abyss’ you’re talking about – and if that black mist-thing that appeared in the clubroom at that time was the entrance to it – then how were you able to come back after being swallowed by it?”

In reply, Yoishi sat up with a curious expression on her face.

“Why, you ask…?”

And then, she told me, with a gaze that seemed to taste the despair inside me.

“Because, I’m---"

“Someone who's already been thoroughly consumed.”

Case 10: The Invisible Friend

Movies can change your life. It's possible that a person, who was thinking of ending their life, would, after seeing this movie, happily trot out of the cinema and go buy a flower for themselves—

A guy in my high school who was really into movies said that; I wonder how he's doing nowadays.

The 'Yoishi Mitsurugi Rehabilitation Plan' had gotten off to a hopeless start, but I was instantly comforted when I remembered this line and that film buff's boundless, radiating smile. I reassured myself, thinking I'd only just started. Having said that, I had realized something: The only thing besides the occult that brough a faint glimmer to Yoishi Mitsurugi's eyes, was movies.

She'd sometimes wander off to the rental store, borrow a few films and watched them alone on her computer. What types of movies did she watch? …Well, it was obvious. She wouldn't be watching anything like a teary-eyed drama about human relationships or a thrilling action adventure that made you scream with excitement. One day, she was watching a splatter horror film with intense concentration that had more blood 'splattering', rather than 'gushing', I asked her if she'd ever been moved emotionally by anything, and she looked at me with a curious expression.

"Animals… you said you had no interest in them. Then, look, what about kid stuff? Wouldn't it be refreshing to be a child again?"

"The world of children is much crueler."

Her words suddenly made me bitter as they reminded me of the incident from the other day, but I refused to back down.

"But even you might have kids one day."

“I will not - I will never do anything to leave my genes in this world.”

Yoishi asserted flat out, without losing her expression.

I’m still a long way from seeing her smile, I thought, but when I heard that, I also had a deep feeling of relief somehow.

That was in a way, a declaration of Yoishi’s chastity, a declaration of her virginity. I think I was somewhat relieved to know she was a virgin. No, it wasn’t because I was into virgins or anything like that, it was just a sense of relief that the cause of her twisted nature was not a result of sexual abuse suffered at the hands of a close relative, like what might have been for Ayana Takamura, who disappeared in the underground place of the Koumei institute.

It's been about half a year since I met her. But Yoishi was yet to even speak of her family. It was actually difficult to ask her, since she was emitting a hundred-meter aura in every cardinal direction suggesting that if you were to ask about her family, she’d put a curse on you with all her knowledge. That’s why I didn’t ask, and I felt I would probably never have the chance to.

“But – saying that.”

It was also true that it would be a problem if I don’t ask some day.

After all, someone else's daughter was living -- or rather, parasitizing - in the loft of my apartment. Whenever I’d see Krishna-san, she’d persistently ask: “When are you going to resolve the situation?”, and moreover, this was not a normal situation.

I mean, was it my fault?

When I think about that day again, I still get angry.

In the first place, when Yoishi came to my apartment, it was bad enough that Karasu-san happened to be there. Karasu-san was from the old guard and a regular visitor to the occult site ‘Ikaigabuchi’. She was a beautiful woman whose age was unknown, and her actual profession was being a fortune teller, but she had a propensity to be too easy going or too mischievous, to think everything is fine as long

as it's funny and to take no account of the trouble she caused to those around her.

She babbled something incomprehensible like: 『There, there, it’s fine, isn’t it? It’s better to live together first than to get married out of the blue.』 wearing a grin on her face; At that time, I was pinned down with my legs tied. During that period, Yoishi finished shifting her things in the blink of an eye. Even though I say she shifted her things, she took out from her bag what seemed to be the only possession she had brought along: her laptop, and threw all my stuff down from the loft, but that was the start of her life as a parasite in my home.

But they say, ‘There’s no use crying over spilled milk’, and it’s not in my nature to grumble about things that have already happened. Yes, even if it’s a misty hope behind the fog, the journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step. It's all about action, determination.

Having said that, I was painstakingly working to improve Yoishi’s eating habits, and trying to change her life cycle to a daytime one every day. I made her clean up after herself, made her habitualize taking a bath, and hoped that one day – I could fill in the blank pieces of Yoishi Mitsurugi that existed inside me. I hoped that a day might come... when she would finally smile.

And thus, it was on a Sunday in December.

“Yoishi! Lunch is ready!”

It was in the afternoon that day, I had cooked Chinese style fried rice with lettuce and pork for two people and called out to Yoishi in the loft, but there was no reply, nor did she come down.

“Heeeey, Yoishi!”

I called out once more, but there was no reply; I clicked my tongue and climbed up the ladder.

There, I found her lying in her permanently laid out futon wearing her school uniform, she had headphones on and some sort of video

was playing on her computer. It was a little unusual to see her excited with eyes wide open. I crawled up to the loft and stood next to her, wondering if she had rented a hit film, when I realized…

The LCD panel of her computer wasn't playing a movie. It looked like some kind of amateur home video. It appeared to be an event at some kindergarten. It showed smiling children marching in a line in an auditorium-like building, with their parents around them, creating a very congenial atmosphere.

"What is this--? A video of someone you know?"

I asked, but Yoishi silently put her index finger to her lips.

"It starts *now*."

"…Huh?"

Yoishi unplugged the wire from the headphone jack, and the audio started playing through the computer speakers. I had no choice but to sit down next to Yoishi in my apron and peered into the screen with my face up close.

Mixed in with the noisy cheers of the crowd was the frolicking voices of the kindergarten children. The slight camera shakes and frequent panning of the camera in search of a subject truly did resemble a home video. The cameraman's focus seemed to be the children in their yellow uniforms for most of the time – but at certain points, the camera was panned to the left as if they had suddenly noticed something. The camera wanders through the parents as if looking for something, or rather, someone. But after doing so for a while, the camera abruptly returns to the march of the school children once more.

"Why did it turn to the left just now?"

Yoishi operated the computer in silence and rewound the footage again.

The footage starts to play once more. The cheerful kindergartners. The smiling parents looking at the camera. And the camera suddenly

pans to the left once again. It lingers for a while in search of a subject, then returns to focus on the kids in the front again—

“Huh?”

I suddenly noticed something strange.

“Show it to me once more.”

Yoishi rewinds the video once again. The video pans left from the marching school kids. In the far back rows of the parents --Ah, I knew it. There was a kindergartner dressed in a yellow school uniform and a hat. It was too blurry and far away to determine if it was a boy or a girl… but, that child alone stood still in the corner of the parents' section, with their head down, looking like they were the only one not taking part in the fun event.

“Why is that child… not taking part in the march?”

As I uttered that, Yoishi rewound the video again and played it back once more. This time from the point the camera panned to the left. It showed the figure of the lone kindergartner amidst the parents, and that was when I finally felt a sense of unease. For some reason, a shiver ran down my spine.

“…P-play it once again, please.”

After a few more replays, I finally realized what that was.

More so than I saw earlier, no, the more I replayed it…. The more different that kindergartner’s body leaned. It seemed as if their body was turning towards us slowly. At the same time a shivering cold took over me, and I remembered.

It was something I had seen on the internet, a famous ghost story among occult enthusiasts.

It began when a university film club snuck into a train station late at night to film. They wanted footage of an empty station, but after they finished filming and checked the footage, they somehow found a woman on the platform with an umbrella on the next platform across the tracks. The student who was director among them seemed angry

on why no one had seen her during filming, but as they replayed the footage, someone noticed.

Why was the woman there alone at the station after the last train had departed?

Moreover, each time the footage was replayed, wasn't the woman turning her body towards the camera, little by little?

Everyone laughed in the beginning, thinking such a thing wasn't possible, but after ten replays, everyone started to go quiet. The woman whose back was clearly turned away from the camera, had turned her body far back enough that her face was visible. With long black hair and head hung down, her movements which indicated she would soon look up and face the camera, made everyone tremble with fear, and the film was sealed and burnt in a temple. After that, it was said that the film crew members met with strange accidents and died – I didn't know the details. I think there might have been some embellishments as well.

Suddenly recalling that story, I panicked and stopped the video.

"….Ooo, Oi, Yoishi…This, it can't be…?"

Yoishi, who was close enough to catch my breath, spoke happily.

"It's the real thing."

○

Yoishi called the rental store to check; It seemed that the person who rented the DVD previously returned it with the wrong disc, and the shop owner failed to check it, so it found its way here.

"What kind of person had this in their possession, I wonder?"

Yoishi eyes lit up as she asked, and after we gulped down the fried rice that had already turned cold, we rode together on the mama bike

and headed towards the rental shop.

We arrived at the rental shop, a complex attached to a video game and book department. It was crowded with customers on a Sunday. I stopped my mama bike at the entrance and locked it, while Yoishi quickly headed inside towards the reception. I entered the shop belatedly and watched from a short distance, the young male shop assistant was apologizing profusely and seemed to be asking if she would like to borrow it again.

“I don't have time for that anymore.”

Yoishi shook her head, and then pressed the apologetic-looking employee, “Instead, I'd like you to tell me who rented this film before me.”

However, despite it being a mistake on the employees’ part, he refused, saying “I’m afraid we can’t do that.” Well, that was obvious as it was personal information. Yoishi persistently nagged him for a while, saying, "Do something about that", but the shopkeeper just bowed his head and refused to do so.

Eventually, Yoishi left the reception area, and I followed her.

As I approached Yoishi, who seemed to hide behind a pillar, she spoke:

“We'll see what happens here for a while. That employee is bound to contact the previous borrower to retrieve the original disc.”

“I see.”

We killed time by pretended to see a trailer of a new film on display on the monitor there, while keeping an eye on the employee from earlier, he soon started making a phone call somewhere while looking at his computer screen. After staring intently at the fingertips of the employee pressing the buttons on the push-button phone, Yoishi took out her phone and inputted some numbers. She then pressed the call button after the employee had finished talking and hung up.

--This girl could actually be a detective in the future.

I watched her in amazement, but as Yoishi said “Hello”, I involuntarily held my breath.

“Sorry for disturbing you once more. I’m calling from the video rental store again.”

I drew closer to Yoishi and leaned my ear into the phone to catch the voice from the other side.

〈…I told you I can't come today.〉

The voice from the other side seemed to belong to a woman. She spoke in a somewhat muffled tone of voice.

“Yes, I understand. There was something we forgot to mention – actually, the film has been booked by another customer, and if it's all right with you, we'd like to come and retrieve it now, so may we come over to your house?”

〈……..〉

The woman on the other side briefly went silent as if troubled by the request.

However, she eventually consented with a small, muffled〈… Understood〉, “Is this address alright?” Yoishi asked as she gave her a random address.

Thereupon, the other party must have said 'no', and Yoishi immediately apologized.

“We’re sorry, it seems the address has been entered incorrectly in the system. Can you please inform us of the correct one once more?”

After that, Yoishi quickly jotted down the correct address she managed to wring out of the woman on a piece of paper. All I could do was watch on nervously.

“You’re… amazing.”

I said that to Yoishi after she hung up,

“Let’s go.” said Yoishi, and we immediately set off.

The address led us to a residential area near Shakujii Park, far north of Kichijoji Station. The area was densely populated with rather small dwellings via several small alleys, making it difficult to get a sense of direction.

Yoishi checked the address on the telephone pole with the paper in one hand, and continued walking. I followed behind, pushing my mama bicycle.

“Say. It’s alright to visit that house, but, what are we going to do about that DVD the person mistakenly put in there instead of the film? Isn’t it still back at the shop?”

“You receive the film and return it to the shop as the shopkeeper doesn’t know your face, and you officially receive that DVD instead. You then return it to this person again.”

“Ah…. I see.”

“If you do that, we can talk to that person twice, and watch it once more.”

“If possible, I don’t wanna see that again.”

As I told her that.

“It’s here.”

Yoishi stopped in her tracks.

It was— one of the small developments in a residential area. Strangely enough, even though it was broad daylight, the house seemed dimly lit. The plot of about 83 square meters was surrounded by a wall, and along the inside of the wall was covered thick with many dogwood trees that had not been touched for quite some time now. The nameplate on the rusty iron gate read 'Iizuka'. Peering inside through the spider-webbed gateposts, I saw a doghouse by the front door. But there was nothing inside – or rather, the entrance to

the kennel was boarded up and nailed shut, which felt creepy.

“Huh… what a creepy house.”

I turned back to see Yoishi had her lips pursed together, her pale face seemed to be even paler. She looked like she was trying very hard to endure.

“H...hey, are you gonna throw up? Is that it?”

--Shit. I had forgotten to bring along a plastic bag since we had left in a hurry.

As I fumbled around both my pockets:

“…It’s alright.”

Yoishi muttered as she staggered to the sooty intercom next to the gate and pressed the button. A chime rang out from inside the house, and eventually a quiet voice came through the intercom speaker, “… Yes.”

Yoishi had a deathly expression on her face and didn’t say anything, so I had no choice but to answer in her stead.

“W…we’re from the rental shop that called earlier! We’re here to pick up the film!”

The front door opened inaudibly – And a woman who looked to be in her thirties appeared.

“…Please come in.”

“S-sorry to disturb you.”

Leaving me aside, I thought that Yoishi, dressed in a high school uniform would be nothing but suspicious, but the woman didn’t seem to care about that at all.

We took off our shoes at the entrance, went past the creaking, dimly lit corridor and were shown into a 10 sqm living room, where we sat

down in front of a wooden table as indicated by the woman.

“I’ll bring some tea.”

While the woman was in the kitchen, I managed to get a look around the room. The ceiling wasn't so high, and an old, worn-out carpet lay spread on the tatami. There were several stains on the carpet, probably from children spilling on it.

Come to think about it, there were a number of stains on the tatami in the living room of my parent's home. I guess that’s how it is in a house with small children. However, it was as silent as the grave inside the house, as if there wasn't anyone else present besides that woman.

Nonetheless, it was dark.

Despite the curtains of the sash leading to the small courtyard being open, a gloomy darkness clung to the room. Was the room just bad at receiving sunlight? The warm winter sunshine continued to fall outside in the courtyard, but the room received none of that blessing.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting."

The woman eventually brought two teas and an open DVD.

"...Here, I'm sorry. I ended up returning it with the wrong disc."

"Ah, yes, that seems to have been the case."

I said that while taking the disc from the woman, when "...Well then", she looked at me in the face.

Her emaciated face… shocked me. I checked her appearance carefully once more. Her face, without any makeup, was pale and had several deep wrinkles. There were dark circles under her eyes, and her lips looked parched. Even though she wasn't that old, there were many white streaks running through her shoulder-length hair.

--She was dead, while alive.

I shook my head in a panic as I suddenly thought such insolent

things.

"Ah, ummm - - About the DVD you mistakenly put in. Hmm... that is..."

I looked to my side, puzzled as what to say.

"I have a question."

Yoishi, who had been quiet all this while, suddenly spoke up.

"Are you the one who shot that video?"

"…Which video are you referring to?"

"The video taken at that kindergarten."

In response, the woman's eyes opened slightly.

"…Did you see that one?"

"I'm sorry. We had to make sure of the contents."

"…How much of it did you watch...?"

"All of it."

Yoishi answered.

"We saw all of it, including the child who shouldn't have been there."

A chilling cold air rose at these words.

I gripped my knees as I sat in the formal position.

"...Is that so?"

The woman looked away from us, and her gaze focused downwards, as if she stared on the stains on the carpet. She stayed like that as Yoishi asked her.

"Who is that child, and what meaning does that video have? Actually, a lot of bad things have happened at our store since then. I believe

you have an idea of the kind of things that are happening."

Yoishi had spoken that much, when--

"Mai!"

Suddenly, the woman turned and sent an ear-splitting scream my way, causing me to buckle reflexively.

"Go over there!"

After looking closely, I saw that her focus was behind us, and I turned back to see a paper sliding door closing behind me.

"…That was my daughter, I beg your pardon."

"....Ah, not at all."

Apparently, her child was in the next room.

"--Have you heard the rumor of the child known as 'Shōko-chan'?"

"Huh?"

I tilted my head in puzzlement at the unexpected question, as the woman continued.

"My daughter really loves that rumor in her kindergarten. She says it's a secret friend that the adults can't see and only the preschoolers know about."

"Is the child in that video that 'Shōko-chan'?"

Yoishi asked, but it seemed as if her question didn't reach that woman.

"One day, a lone frog was found stabbed to death at the end of the bamboo in the kindergarten's hedge."

The woman narrated the tale, letting her words fall to the floor.

"The teachers seemed to have been frightened and removed it, but after a few days, another frog stabbed to death was discovered. And

then... they gathered all the children together and cautioned them not to do such poor things to living creatures. They didn't intend to go into who did it, but one of the children was brought to tears and said, 'I tried to stop it'. They then asked if he knew who did it, and after hesitating for a moment, he answered, 'Shōko-chan'. However, there was no such child bearing that name in the kindergarten. The teachers thought it must have been someone's nickname, but shortly afterwards, the child who told them the name had a traffic accident. The child survived, but the shock was so severe that he soon transferred to another school. After that, a strange rumor started spreading among the children: 'Takuya-kun had an accident because he tattled to the teachers.'"

"Does that mean he got into an accident because 'Shōko-chan' held a grudge against him?'"

Yoishi interjected, and the woman nodded slightly.

"However, as I mentioned earlier, there were no children named 'Shōko-chan' enrolled in that kindergarten. Nevertheless, some of the old staff members knew the name, and there were stories from children of all generations: of children who were locked in the barn where entry was forbidden, or children who had burns on their stomachs, backs and other parts of their bodies that were not easily seen by adults."

"That film—"

Yoishi asked her:

"Were you the one who made that video?"

"…Yes."

"Were you trying to film your daughter?"

"…Yes."

"Why did you turn the camera midway through to an irrelevant direction away from your daughter?"

"…That was… I somehow felt I had to point the camera in that

direction… Yes, I unwittingly pointed my camera that way.”

“Do you think the child in the film present where they’re not supposed to be is ‘Shōko-chan’?”

“…I don’t know.”

“How many times did you see that film?”

However, the moment Yoishi mouthed those words.

I was horrified, as the woman suddenly grabbed her hair tightly and started to pull with enough force to tear it all off.

--Hey Yoishi. Stop it. Something's wrong with her.

I gently tapped Yoishi’s knee with the intention of telling her so, but she continued her interrogation without a care.

“Did you watch it until the child turned his head completely? Did you make eye contact wi—”

“A, …
AAAGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!”

The woman started screaming, and I shrieked back in fear.

But - at the same time – Yoishi sitting right next to me started making a strange noise.

“…B, Blaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaarrrgghhhh!”

The pale Yoishi suddenly began to vomit loudly on the spot.

“U-ooooooooooooo…”

Despite being screamed at from the front and the side, I still managed to catch Yoishi’s vomit in mid-air by holding out my hands thanks to my reaction speed, which was in a realm where it could be called that of a master or an expert. I somehow managed to protect the carpet in someone else's house from her vomit, but my hands were

now filled with her warm puke.

“…I, I’m terribly sorry.”

I apologized to the woman, but I didn't know what to do from there. I had no idea what I was doing anymore, I was here in this creepy house, sandwiched between two denpas, with vomit in my hands. The woman who shouted for a while fell silent again, and Yoishi being Yoishi, didn’t care about the drool on her mouth, and continued to ask questions.

“You returned that film to the rental store on purpose, didn’t you?”

The woman looked up slightly at Yoishi’s question, but I looked at her, startled.

--On purpose? What do you mean, on purpose?

“You must have deliberately returned that film to the rental store. Was it because you were afraid of the footage of the schoolchild turning towards you every time it played? Because you felt something would happen if you looked at their face? No. Maybe you already made eye-contact with the child in the video -- and maybe, something already happened in this house. Perhaps something is happening to your daughter."

“…Please leave.”

The woman spoke in a frail voice.

“I think you’re better off not knowing any more than that. Besides -- you two are not from that store, correct?”

…Damn, we got caught.

I mean, wasn’t it obvious?

A high school girl school uniform who asks such sharp questions and then suddenly throws up in her companion's hands can't possibly be an employee from the rental store.

“Please excuse us.”

I apologized, stood up and kicked Yoishi on the knee with my toe.

It was an obvious signal that enough was enough, and that it was time to leave.

○

When I went outside, I felt a dazzling sense of brightness.

The oxygen was thick, the sunlight felt warm. Above all, there was a sense of liberation, as if I had escaped from a monotone world and discovered a world of color. I wanted to take a deep breath, but the sour smell from the liquid on my hands prevented me from doing that. As I contemplated on what to do with it:

“If we don't hurry, it could get bad.”

Yoishi spoke that, and began to walk at a brisk pace. She still looked pale, but her gait was steadier than before.

“H, hey, wait a second! My bike! You push my bike!”

Yoishi tossed her black hair, turned around and tilted her head in puzzlement.

“Don’t act like you don’t know why. My hands are full because of you, the least you could do is push my bike.”

Yoishi then stood motionlessly in place as she stared at the vomit in my hands as if she had just noticed, and spoke:

“Are you a vomit maniac or something?”

“…Huh?”

“How long are you going to keep carrying that around as if it were precious material?”

“…Y,Y, You bitch. There’s no way anyone would carry this around

because they liked it! If you're gonna go around throwing up everywhere, then it's your job to carry a plastic bag with you at all times! I mean, is this stinky crap something you can just casually throw everywhere? It's a nuisance to the neighborhood, so throw it in the toilet of a park somewhere! And wash my hands while you're at it!"

Hearing my fervent speech go that far, Yoishi finally put her hands on the mama bike.

Although she seemed very reluctant to do so, we went to the toilet in Shakujii Park together. After dumping Yoishi's vomit in the public toilet by the entrance, I thoroughly washed my hands with soap in the hand-washing area. Not having a handkerchief, I wiped my wet hands on the back of my jeans.

"Say, have you heard the term, Imaginary companion?"

Yoishi suddenly asked me out of the blue.

"Imaginary companion…? Ah… it's that, right? A friend who only exists in your imagination when you're a kid, right?"

"Yes, also known as an imaginary friend. Children are in their own way, under pressure adults cannot perceive. Their minds have not developed resistance or anything yet, so they create the ultimate ideal, an imaginary friend to protect themselves."

"I've heard about it before, so what of it?"

I asked that much, when I suddenly realized.

"….Eh? Wait, are you saying… that's what we saw in the DVD?"

Yoishi shook her head and said 'I don't know', before walking off.

"At first, I thought that was the case – but, I feel it's different somehow."

Her white face hung downwards as she moved away, I drag my mama bike in a rush to catch up with her.

“Wait, why is there an imaginary friend in the video?”

Besides that, according to the story that woman named Iizuka told us, the image of the rumored ‘Shōko-chan’ sounded more like it was the target of everyone’s fear. It was nothing like an ideal friend that appeared in order to protect a child’s spirit. On top of that, wasn’t it weird how all the other kids shared that image?

“Right, it’s weird.”

Yoishi muttered happily for some reason.

“That’s exactly what makes me curious.”

Her eyes were suddenly filled with vitality. They shone with such energy that it was hard to believe she had just vomited a few moments ago.

“Anyways, we’ve already lost twenty minutes. Let’s hurry up.”

“Hurry up…? What for?”

“We need to hurry up and make sure that video isn’t seen by anyone else.”

As I looked at Yoishi, who had already taken a seat on the back of the mama bike and was waiting for me to get on, I felt deeply dismayed.

--Oi, just how many times did we see that dangerous video?

Thereafter, we rode double on the mama bike illegally back to the rental shop, and as per Yoishi’s suggestion, I returned the movie that should have been returned originally and took back that creepy DVD with the kindergartner once more. The store employee put the DVD in a cheap case, as though he felt bad about giving it back bare-cased, but even so, it felt scary to hold the DVD with that creepy thing in it directly in my hand. Staring at the light bounce off the disc inside the case made me reluctantly recall that grainy video. A chill ran down my spine as I recalled the kindergartner with their head hanging

down, and how, with each successive replay, their body slowly turned towards us and head raises up with each playback.

Despite that, I had no choice to take it with me, so I quickly made my way to the exit and thrust the DVD into Yoishi's hands, who was waiting outside the shop.

"Here. So, what do you plan on doing with it?"

"I wonder."

Yoishi gave an irresponsible comment, but—

Didn't you take it back because you had some kind of plan?

"Say, what did you mean when you said that woman deliberately returned this DVD to the shop?"

"Same as you are now. She didn't want to hold it for a long time, so throwing it away was the best option, and I believe she threw it away many times over. However, in all likelihood -- this ended up returning."

"Ended up returning??"

"There are things in this world imbued with such a nature, like 'A doll that's been loved for a long time', or 'A creation you put your heart and soul into', Most of the time, it's just that the original owner hasn't quite let go of the old feelings in their heart and is calling them back."

That suddenly made me recall the doll memorial in the temple[5] I saw when I was on a school field trip to Kyoto. I recalled that in one corner of that temple, a smaller temple surrounded by shimenawa[6] was built separately, where countless dolls were bunched together and how they stared coldly at me. I recalled the bundle of hollow stares that suggested they were no longer needed by their masters, and I remember running off reflexively.

"It would be best to seal it off somewhere."

--Hey, don't tell me you plan on swiping another shimenawa from a temple again? I had a bad feeling as I stared at Yoishi play around with the DVD in her hand by spinning it round, when—

"Oh, Nagi-kun-- and Yoishi-chan?"

Hearing a familiar voice call out my name, I turned around and saw Karasu-san there for some reason.

She was wearing what could be called her trademark black camisole with a fluffy fur shawl, twirling her car keys with her fingers, and had a broad grin covering her entire face.

"What are you two doing here on a Sunday?"

The female fortuneteller and longtime regular of 'Ikaigabuchi' asked me as she wore her beautiful black hair tied high on her head today. She was a tall woman by nature, and also a beauty with a flamboyant face. In addition to all that, she had a loud voice, which made her truly stand out. With her appearance alone, she gave the impression of a large sunflower blooming in full bloom, and we were instantly the center of attention from everyone around us.

"Us? What are *you* doing here?"

I asked back in a hushed voice.

"Me? Well, I'm just wandering around because it's my day off, but…? Aaah… could you two be on a date? A date! I love it, I love it!!"

It's not a date; Your voice is too loud.

I was about to say that, when she suddenly grabbed me with her arm and put me in a tight headlock. Under the fluffy shawl, my cheeks were buried in Karasu-san's soft bust, and I could smell her nice fragrance. Locked in a headlock, I was dragged towards the parking lot.

"Say, say, say, Nagi-kun? Don't you have anything to report to me?"

"W-what are you talking about?"

“There you go again, playing the fool. You’re still living together with Yoishi, aren’t you? Which means… you’re together now, right? In short, it’s become that sort of thing, right?”

“…Huh?”

“Tell me, tell me, what did you think of Yoishi-chan's lips and all that?? That girl’s a little strange, but she's got some serious quality, doesn't she? Even as a woman, her eyebrows and eye shape make my heart throb, so I don't blame you for losing patience, but aah, damn, I'm so disappointed in myself. If I could meet a girl like that, I wish I’d been born a man!”

“—A-are you... are you nuts! What are you talking about?!”

“Oh my, you're all red-faced. After all, a 16-year-old girl makes a big decision and walks into a guy's house. Oh, the two can’t possibly still be platonic, right? I think that’s super unhealthy.”

“*Which* one is unhealthy?! In the first place, if you hadn’t placed me in a headlock like this back then, I wouldn’t have been caught up as an offender of the Youth protection ordinance. Yoishi wouldn’t have started parasitizing in my house.”

I finally managed to break free of Karasu-san’s headlock and declared that.

“Be thankful, I arranged a special event in your springtime of youth.”

Karasu-san laughed as she cheerfully slapped me on the shoulder.

--It’s no good. Her pace might have made me genetically incapable of fighting back… is what I thought, when—

“Hmm?”

Suddenly, Karasu-san stared at me and gave a puzzled look. She skillfully raised only one of her slender, well-groomed eyebrows and put her hand on my cheek.

“W, what is it?”

“You’re having trouble with women, aren’t you?”

“Trouble with women? Yeah, I’m having trouble with *you*!”

I retorted scathingly, but Karasu-san replied with no, no, no, and started stroking my chin and cheekbones with her fingertips even further.

“This is—trouble with a woman far younger than me. And it’s not Yoishi either. Right—if I had to guess, I’d say a girl of elementary school age. It can’t be, don’t tell me you touched an elementary school girl. You know that’s a crime, right?”

“Of course not! I mean, you’re the one who helped a high school girl parasitize in the loft of my apartment, so please don't talk to me about crime.”

Ah, her fortune-telling was always like this. It was, how do you say: Out of focus? Unreliable? It wasn’t there when you needed it, and there were times when she would gleefully tell you of disasters that had already passed by. That elementary school girl she mentioned was probably the girl selling ghost photographs -- Akane Nanamori. That was already a bitter memory that remained within me.

“Well, be careful. These days, elementary school kids can be very mature.”

She spoke somewhat elatedly -- The carefree fortuneteller then waved a "Yoo-hoo" to Yoishi, who had remained silent for a long time.

“Yoishi-chan, how have you been?”

As if finally noticing her at last, Yoishi silently turned her eyes towards Karasu-san.

“My, my, Yoishi-chan is as cute as ever. Your deep eyes look like they could steal my soul, I can't help but adore them. I think I might lean that way!”

Even in the face of such cringe-worthy dialogue, Yoishi maintained a blank expression.

On the contrary, she waited for Karasu-san to finish speaking, before muttering:

“Is the apartment next door yours?”

“…Huh?”

“Next door to our apartment -- room 101. I heard you're using it as a storage space.”

“Ahh, that’s right, but… what about it?”

Karasu-san nodded cheerfully, and Yoishi asked a strange question:

“Who’s in there?

…Huh?

I looked at Yoishi’s face with my mouth agape.

Not ‘what’s in there?’, but ‘*who*’s in there?’

“Who, you ask, ermmm…. there's just a bunch of stuff in there…”

Karasu-san spoke somewhat evasively, prompting Yoishi to interrogate her further.

“That's strange. I can sense the presence of at least ten or so people in that room at any given time.”

Her words sent a shiver down my spine.

T…ten? Eh, what? What did that mean?

Astonished, I looked at Karasu-san to see that she too, was unnerved.

“.....Oh, uh—that is, I mean….”

“What *DO* you mean?”

When I pressed her as well, the female fortuneteller finally opened up reluctantly.

“Actually..... There's a lot of items in that room with a shady history, you know, items that have been entrusted to me by customers.”

“Items with a shady history?”

“No, no, no, no, it’s not a big deal! It’s merely common stuff like ‘A mirror with a person trapped inside’, ‘a meat mask that can’t be taken off once worn’, or ‘a laughing doll’! But more so than being kept in storage, they are items that are sealed away because they can’t be touched presently – Ah, but Nagi-kun, you don't have to get all teary-eyed. They've all been spiritually treated. Nothing will happen unless you go in there and break the seal!”

“T-that’s not the problem here! Don’t seal such suspicious things next to someone’s apartment! No, I mean, please don't say such things in front of her right now!”

If it says ‘Enter and you will die,’ Yoishi would enter even if she had to kick the door down. If there was a sign that says you will be cursed if you open it, she would use any and all means necessary to open it.

As expected of her, Yoishi whispered:

“Show me that place.”

“…Eh?”

Karasu-san was at a loss for words; I shouted out loud as if moving her out of the way.

“No, no! Don't make things more complicated than they already are! We need to get rid of that DVD first!”

“That’s why, I need to see it.”

“…What did you say?”

“There might be something we can use.”

○

…Oi, you gotta be kidding me. The moment Karasu-san opened the door to the storage room, I was already at my wits end.

As soon as we entered, I saw countless talismans stuck on top of the front door. They were also stuck above the door of the modular bath, and another in the cramped kitchen. For some reason, many of the talismans were old, and some were blackened as if they had been blasted from above with a gas burner. But the most bizarre thing about this room was that the partition door leading to the living room had been removed and was replaced by a thick, old shimenawa. You would never see such an impressive thing even at a shrine. And it was definitely not something you'd find in an ordinary rental apartment.

"…Karasu-san, please explain it to me."

"You've seen it before, haven't you? A shimenawa?"

"I understand that, I'm a regular user of 'Ikaigabuchi' too! What I'm asking is, why is there such a huge shimenawa in a place like this? It's strange, no matter how you think about it! This is just like the doll memorial in Kyoto…"

I said that much, and then, Ah, I understood.

…I see. So that's why Yoishi wanted to see this place. This was a room built exactly for that purpose, a room for slowly purifying items that couldn't be out in the world, items that had a certain history about them – Wait, this wasn't a time to be accepting.

"K-K-Karasu-san! If you had something like this next door, you should have told me when you introduced me to this apartment."

"No, because, you were in a very precarious situation at that time."

"Being in a precarious situation means that I don't have the right to make such a basic choice?"

I yelled out loud at Karasu-san, but I felt my voice being swallowed by the darkness behind the shimenawa.

There were countless boxes placed in the dark living room behind the shimenawa, but even I, despite having no ability to sense the paranormal, could tell. Something felt wrong. I could tell from that fact that although the light in the corridor was switched on, the living room right next to it was dark, as if it repelled the light. It was, how should I put it, otherworldly. The air itself was distinctly different. There was something so thick in the air that made me believe it was dangerous, to the point where even the gravity there might be different.

However, Yoishi took off her shoes, quickly went under the shimenawa alone by herself, and muttered “How wonderful” to herself.

“Right, right?”

Karasu-san nodded happily as she followed, and seeing Yoishi happily pick up the suspicious items one after another and stare at them as if she were admiring antiques made me think dark thoughts to myself:

--Hey, take a look. This is what a true occult maniac looks like. In internet slang, they're the ‘denpas’ who suddenly broadcast their occult fantasies to the world. Ever since the cat incident happened, some people in the western club building branded me as a ‘weirdo who likes scary stories’, but even that perception will be completely overturned when they find out about this kind of existence. I'm sure they will understand how normal, how much of a beginner I am in the unfathomable world of the occult -- I thought such thoughts to myself, while I waited in the corridor, refusing to go through the shimenawa by myself; I saw Yoishi in the living room lift something and ask Karasu-san:

“This is?”

“Oh, they’re opposite mirrors that were in the storehouse of a large landowner in Toyama. It is said that if you hold the two mirrors up to each other on the night of the new moon, you will multiply.”[7]

“What do you mean by multiply?”

“They say that your reflection in the mirror starts to take on a different personality. If you were to close the mirror in fear, the self in the mirror would remain there, and begin life anew in the world of the mirror. It is said that the mirror was originally used in a local brothel, but the details are unknown. Anyway, it's dangerous, so it's wrapped up nice and tight and can’t be opened.”

“Hey…Yoishi, don't open that thing, okay?”

I warned her from the corridor, but of course, Yoishi wasn’t listening.

“This cell phone is…?”

“This is similar to the story, ‘The Monkey's Paw’ by W. W. Jacobs. From what I’ve heard, it seems to be a cell phone found in the hands of a child who committed suicide, and if you were to press the call button on the phone and make a wish, the wish will be granted in a dubious way. Like getting into the school of your choice, but losing a leg in exchange.”

“And these shoes?”

“Ah, those are dangerous. A certain man is said to have crafted them from the skin of his wife. They seemed to have been at bad terms from the start, but the husband killed his wife and made shoes out of her skin so that he could trample over her, again and again. But it seems that shortly afterwards, the husband jumped off a building while wearing those very same shoes.”

…What the hell is that….? Why, why the hell is that thing here??

“This rope is…?”

“That is said to have been used by people who hung themselves in the dense woodlands. The local police and fire brigade found it when they made their regular patrols, but no matter how many times they cut it off when they recovered the bodies, people kept using it to commit suicide again and again for some unknown reason. It was as if the string was enticing them, so they handed it over to a local shrine, but the head priest there also ended up committing suicide, so

after a series of events, it made its way here."

…Wait, what the heck *were* the events happened that brought it here? Why the hell were so many dangerous things all gathered in the apartment next to mine? Now that I think about it, when I ran away from that 'Wish-fulfilling house', Karasu-san quickly introduced me to this apartment, but why was a cheap place so close to the university vacant up until now? Wasn't it because it was a dangerous place?

Once a person starts thinking negative thoughts, those thoughts begin to growl and spin, faster and faster. I began to worry about the potholes in my life one after another.

I was in a situation where I was going in and out of the Beatnik Research Society, aka one of the largest occult sites in Japan, my apartment had a collection of cursed items next to it, and moreover, a girl resembling a vengeful spirit inhabited my loft. I'd become numb to the fact that Yoishi was close by because of everything that had happened, but this was definitely not a normal life. I tried to roughly recall the people I'd met since I came to Tokyo, since the 'Ikaigabuchi' offline meeting, it's been nothing but a string of dangerous people starting with Karasu-san, and in the ultimate form of Yoishi Mitsurugi. No, the ultimate of the ultimate was the evil priest, Sako Takita. He was undeniably the worst of the worst, and I don't know if I'd go so far as to lump him with Yoishi, but anyway, the only sane ones are the Kurimoto siblings – no, wait, wait. Am I not being fooled by Krishna-san's large bosom and baby face? Even *she* is clearly involved in the occult, and as long as she is the leader of 'Ikaigabuchi', she can be thought of as a major figure in the occult, right? According to Sako, she was 'on the verge of breaking down once', and even her eloquent younger brother, Yukihito Kurimoto said he had 'died once'. Oooo…. oiii, does that mean that none of them are sane? Does that mean none of them are sane human beings of this world? If I keep on associating with them like this, I'll surely be dragged to the world on the other side, won't I? No, both of my feet are already immersed in the other si – Argh, look at them, your feet. Can you see them clearly? Is that the ground? Are your feet there? Isn't it just an ink-like darkness, spreading outwards….?

"……"

--No.

….It’s….dark.

Before I realized, I was standing alone and still, in the dark.

…Was it a blackout?

But when I reached out my hand, I found that the walls of the apartment that had just been there had disappeared.

…Hey, where is this? Yoishi---? Karasu-san?

I look around frantically, but no one was there. I didn’t even know if I was in a wide, or a narrow place. A sticky darkness alone enshrouded me, a lukewarm darkness that penetrated through my nose and through my mouth.

I grabbed my hair and was about to start screaming, when –

- SLAP*- I was smacked on the shoulder.

“--Yes, deep breaths.”

When I came to, I saw Karasu-san’s smiling face in front of me.

I had slumped down to the floor, and she was crouched beside me, looking at me.

“Take a dee—ep breath in, then hold. Yes, slowly let it out--- Repeat that three times.”

I didn't understand it very well, but I did what she said, I started to breathe better and calmed down. I looked down at my feet in a daze, they were still there. I was wearing gray socks, and sitting on the floor of the apartment. And the fluorescent light was there and all. I was drenched in sweat and there was a wall against my back.

“You'd better remember.”

Karasu-san smiled as she gently stroked my hair.

“Your fear most likely comes from forgetting to breathe.”

“Breathe…?”

“It’s probably the effect of your childhood asthma. If the fear inside you intensifies, then like now, make sure you're breathing properly. No matter what kind of paranormal lies ahead of you, you’ll definitely make it through somehow. As long as you're breathing properly, you're invincible. You're not broken at all.”

I felt my nose reflexively sniffle. That was the kindest look I’d ever seen from the ‘outrageously’ dressed Karasu-san. And that soaked into me like the sunlight on a warm spring day. It became a strong Kotodama, and strengthened the foundations of my heart.

“…Thank you.”

I unconsciously spoke those words of thanks out loud—

“No, you don't have to thank me. Maybe, so…”

Uhehehehe, Karasu-san laughed slack-jawed and my sense of security collapsed in an instant.

“—Let’s use this.”

I heard Yoishi’s voice and raised my head to see she was casually holding up the creepy rope from earlier.

“Use it… for what?”

In response to Karasu-san’s question, Yoishi took out the DVD from her pocket.

“This rope is a ‘sewing thing’.”

“…Hmm? What’s that?”

“It may be the final result, but it is tinged with the idea of ‘sewing’ the subject to the spot. Maybe the first person who committed suicide

with this rope is still haunted by it, unaware of their death. Or perhaps the rope is still faithfully protecting the wish of its first master. The number of things clinging to this rope is so numerous that it makes it hard to fathom their true nature, and the only thing they're staring at, is our necks."

After uttering those horrifying lines—

Yoishi began to unravel the somewhat overtly thick straw rope, split it to a reasonable thickness, and began to tie it around the DVD from all four sides.

"…The rope needs something to bind to, and in this, there exists something to be bound to."

The way she crouched on the living room floor, mumbling something with her mouth as she handled the rope, was, as expected, a ghastly sight.

"Shut up… Be quiet… It doesn't matter what color it is."

I heard such intermittent speech, but I had no idea who she was talking to, and quite frankly, that scared me. Eventually, something that resembled an object bound with rope rolled on the floor, and Yoishi sat down there as if her mind was at peace.

"It should be fine now."

Yoishi muttered, causing Karasu-san to sigh in exasperation and shrug her shoulders.

"And so, the number of strange things keeps growing."

○

About a week had passed since then.

I had no idea what happened since then, and Yoishi didn't talk about it either.

It turned out that the apartment next door was a haunted tool shack, but nothing strange happened. I didn't get paralyzed, or hear any strange noises, and I didn't feel any of the presences Yoishi mentioned. Maybe it really was like Karasu-san said, and the items had been spiritually treated. I was a little disturbed when I went to sleep at night as expected, but… well, if something abnormal were to happen, then the walking spirit sensor in my loft, Yoishi Mitsurugi would warn me about it – But now that I'd had time to calm down, a lot of things didn't add up.

As I'm attending a lecture at university, I think to myself: What did it all mean in the end?

Assuming the kindergartner turning towards the camera in the video was 'Shōko-chan', and supposing that the video was shot by that woman named Iizuka – Yoishi had said that the woman purposefully returned that DVD back to the rental store. Was it because something had already happened in that house? Did something happen to that woman's daughter? Then—in short, what the hell happened to her? Was that the reason behind the immense darkness in that house? I didn't know. Or perhaps it was better that I didn't know -- but somehow, I wasn't satisfied. Was it alright if we were the only ones that were saved? I couldn't shake off those doubts.

I'm sure that was because -- the bitter memory of not having been able to save Akane Nanamori still cast a shadow over me.

Having said that—

After my lecture had finished, I got on my mama bike and headed towards Shakujii Park by myself.

For the time being, I intended to ask around about the rumored 'Shōko-chan' in a nearby kindergarten.

I didn't know how asking around would help. No, I'm sure the situation wouldn't change. I understood that it was already over – or almost over. Still, I couldn't come to terms with it unless I understood the end myself. If I didn't get to the point where I was absolutely sure that there was nothing more I could do, I felt like something would swallow me up someday. I felt that leaving things in an ambiguous

state would be an opening for the monsters to pounce on me. Krishna-san would say that I was an idiot, or that I hadn't matured, but I was beginning to feel that this was what it meant to me to face the paranormal.

And the other reason—

The only other reason -- would be Yoishi.

It would be because of the 'Yoishi Mitsurugi Rehabilitation Plan', the goal to see her smile.

I would definitely see her smile someday. I recently learned that when I muttered this in my mind, that strangely enough, I felt less afraid. To begin with, if I were to decide that Yoishi's reformation was finished as she was now, then in all honesty, I couldn't call it progress. It would just be a bunch of muddling around in the dark, trying to make things add up. That's why, I had to act. Even if it was something I couldn't deal with, I had to act in any way that I could. That was my resolve as a mere human being facing off against the paranormal. Besides, Isn't that what Karasu-san told me as well? 「As long as you're breathing properly, you're invincible」. I was deeply dejected hearing her laughter at the end, but even so, those words touched me more deeply than I had expected. It gave me hope that maybe it was true. Even when I was too scared to move, I still managed to make it through somehow. I had to make sure that I really was 'invincible' in the face of all kinds of paranormal.

"—Well then."

I searched for kindergartens in the vicinity of the Iizuka household, and looking at the map search results on my phone, there were two kindergartens within walking distance of that house. If you were to consider the range with the bus service, the number of kindergartens would increase, but for the time being, I decided to check the ones close by.

In the cold wind, I turned up the collars of my pea coat and pedaled hard on my mama bike. Eventually, I reached Oumekaido Road, where I turned toward Shakujii Park.

I arrived at the Iizuka household shortly thereafter, but only gave it a fleeting glimpse before passing it by. It was still dark and gloomy, and it was hard to tell if anyone was there or not. The boarded-up doghouse was still there, and the curtains were closed.

The kindergarten was located less than five minutes away by bicycle. It was a cute building painted with colorful colors. There were many children playing inside the kindergarten, probably because there was still time before the end of the school-day.

I parked my bike by the fence and watched the children. It was a curious feeling: I wondered if I too, had such fun times once, giggling and running around half-buried tires and monkey bars.

The children, tiny in stature, were already developing their own individuality. There was a boy who was managing a group and leading a game, a boy who was in a world with only two girls, and there was even a gigolo-like preschooler who had several girls as his attendants. When you think about it, a kindergarten is the beginning of the outside world for most human beings. From here, they would experience the world outside the warm confines of family, they'd experience a world that was unjust and unreasonable in many ways.

Welcome to the real world.

Gazing at the children and uttering such strange thoughts out loud, which could neither be described as encouragement nor sympathy, I suddenly take notice of one kid in particular. That boy came right up to the fence I was leaning against, and looked up at me curiously.

"Yo."

I tried greeting him.

The boy just gave a 'yes', and small nod in acknowledgment. However, he did not smile cordially from there. Apparently, this boy had acquired the individuality of not quite being able to fit in with the group.

That was just what I needed, so I asked him:

"There's something I wanted to ask; Do you know the child called

‘Shōko-chan'?”

As soon as he heard that proper noun, the boy was instantly startled. So, he did know, I thought to myself. I smiled and said: “It’s alright.”

“I know her too. So, let’s keep ‘Shōko-chan’ a secret between you and me, okay?”

“…Okay.”

“Where is ‘Shōko-chan’ right now?”

“…”

“Is she here?”

I spoke and looked around inside the kindergarten.

The boy then shook his head in silence.

“Then… where?”

“…She was taken away by that auntie.”

“Auntie?”

“Mai-chan’s auntie.”

--Mai-chan? Huh….Wasn’t ‘Mai’ the name that Iizuka lady shouted when she yelled, ‘Go over there’….?”

“Is Mai-chan also one of your friends?”

It was right when I asked him that question. A woman in an apron who appeared to be a nursery teacher gave me a suspicious look and asked: “What is it?”, her watchful eyes were definitely on the lookout for any suspicious persons.

“Ahh, n-nothing...” As I stammered, the nursery teacher grabbed the boys’ hand and began to pull him away, “Let’s play with everyone.”

The boy looked at me regretfully, but muttered quietly.

“Mai-can… already died.”

“…Eh?”

“It’s because Mai-chan was good friends with ‘Shōko-chan’.”

○

--What did it all mean?

I was frozen still in that spot for a while, before I started pushing my bike, and thought to myself.

Mai-chan was already dead? I had easily assumed Mai-chan’s auntie to be that woman named Iizuka, but --- was the ‘Mai-chan’ that boy mentioned different from the Mai from the Iizuka family? Was this not the kindergarten where the rumor of ‘Shōko-chan’ originated from?

No…that boy knew about ‘Shōko-chan’. There was enough indication that the conversation was relevant. I don’t think it could have been a coincidence. In other words, the kindergarten mentioned in that woman’s story was that place. However, if that were the case – I felt a chill rise up. I had a terrible feeling of dread, so I jumped on the mama bike again. I pressed on the pedals as if something was rushing me.

--Wait a minute, let’s get everything straight. Let’s assume that Mai-chan’s mother was that woman named Iizuka…. 'Mai-chan' and ‘Shōko-chan' were supposedly good friends. Then ‘Shōko-chan’ was something dangerous. At the very least, it wasn’t human. However, if that boy was telling the truth, then ‘Shōko-chan’ was taken away by Mai-chan’s mother – in other words, by that woman named Iizuka. Does that mean that something called ‘Shōko-chan’ was in the Iizuka household right now? Damn it, I didn’t get it. In the first place, wasn’t ‘Shōko-chan’ supposed to be in the DVD, already sealed away by Yoishi? And yet --- And yet, that, what was this unpleasant feeling? What was this uneasy feeling of having looked over

something important? Like an invisible puddle slowly drenching my feet.

At that moment – beneath my feet, something with a splash made a water pattern in the dark puddle that couldn't have existed.

In an instant, I stopped my bicycle involuntarily.

"That's right…..I…."

I didn't see that girl named 'Mai' in the Iizuka household at that time.

I saw the paper door slide shut, but I didn't see get the chance to see the girl properly.

A terrifying chill crawled over my entire back.

And then, all of a sudden – I heard the siren of a fire engine.

The kind of sound that resonated inside you when a fire engine is dispatched, if I recall, it was a warning siren linked with the accelerator. As if being guided by that sound, I started pedaling my mama bike once again. I stood up, pedaled as hard as I could, and went flying.

With each alleyway I turned, the sound of the siren kept getting louder from all sides. I was close. I knew the fire engines were all converging somewhere extremely close by. Eventually, I could see black smoke rising over some rooftops. Curious onlookers were gathering in sparse alleyways. They must have all come out of their houses after hearing the sirens. I pressed my way forward while avoiding them. And with each pedal stroke, my conviction deepens.

I turned down the last alley and flew into the street where the Iizuka household was visible, but a crowd of people was in front of me, so I couldn't go any further. I parked my bike in the shadow of a telephone pole nearby and continued running from there.

"I'm sorry, please let me through!"

I shouted as I continued forward, but the police at the frontline were shouting angrily and pushing back the crowd, halting my progress.

Even so, I could see it through a gap in the crowds. It really… was true. The windows of the Iizuka household were broken, and a black smoke bellowed forth from within. Even from a distance, I could tell how strong of a fire raged within, the fire hose from the fire truck had practically no effect.

“Ah……”

Bitter emotions escape through my mouth without forming words. It was the house I had just passed by. And the house I had entered just recently, albeit only once. The sight of it burning to the point of being unmanageable was just too much for me.

Right then, I felt something cold on my arm, and I turned around.

I looked back to see Yoishi, holding my hand. She had mixed in with the crowd; her pale face looked at me.

“I made a mistake.”

“What mistake?”

“I was wrong about ‘Shōko-chan’.”

Her words darkly distorted the landscape. For the time being, I led Yoishi away from the crowd of people. When we arrived back where I had put my mama bike, I asked:

“Are you telling me that it was ‘Shōko-chan’ behind us that time?”

Yoishi looked at me once, and vaguely nodded.

“But it’s a little more complicated than that.”

“…No, wait a minute. Explain it to me from the beginning in a way I can understand. Just what was ‘Shōko-chan’ anyway? I just came back from that kindergarten. I heard ‘Shōko-chan’ was taken away by that person named Iizuka. And that her daughter – ‘Mai-chan’, was already dead.”

I relayed the story I had heard from the boy in the kindergarten, and Yoishi gave a small nod.

“I heard it as well. Albeit a few days ago.”

“Then….”

“I don’t understand everything either, now that this happened, I can only speculate but – the only thing I can say is that ‘Shōko-chan’ was a living spirit."

A shiver ran down my spine.

A living spirt. [8] It was – in short, a strong emotion that a living human unconsciously emits. Jealously, resentment, and excessive affections turn into curses that cause misfortune, but….

“By living spirit, do you mean to say it’s a living spirit of children? Is that the imaginary friend you mentioned before? But why would an imaginary friend of children be cruel to them?”

“That’s not it. It’s not from children.”

Yoishi’s clear eyes contained a glint of sorrow as she spoke.

“After giving birth and raising them all that time, kindergarten is the place where your children first begin to live with other people’s children. That is the first time that parents see their children through the lens of others. That is when they first start comparing their children to other people's children. Why can’t you do the things that other children can do? Why is that child more adorable? Why don’t you listen to me like those other children? Why, why, why – Yes, a kindergarten is the beginning of the outside world for children, but it’s also true for their mothers.”

“Hey…it can’t be….”

“That’s right, it’s always the adults who distort children.”

“….No way, then ‘Shōko-chan’ is….”

“—Yes. ‘Shōko-chan’ isn’t an imaginary friend of children. It’s an imaginary child of countless mothers.”

For a moment, the face of a child I’d never seen before flashes across

my mind – It was the figure of the child in that DVD, slowly turning around towards me. The child slowly turns their face towards me, and looks up.

That fair, well-formed face, and red eyes look me in the eyes, and smile.

“The proper child who has all the ideal attributes not present in your own child – the child one yearns for. That’s what ‘proper Shōko-chan’, and the ‘yearned Shōko-chan’ originally was.[9] However, the girl transformed at some point. She transformed into the being that blamed her own child for not being able to become the ideal child. Eventually, that warped ideal child turned into an existence that blames and harms countless children - 'Harmful Shōko-chan’[10]."

“No… wait a second. A moment ago, you said it was a little more complicated, what did you mean by that? Why was that imaginary child taken away by Iizuka?”

“That woman, never had a child to begin with.”

“…Huh? Then who was the Mai-chan that died?”

With a somewhat cold gaze, Yoishi focused at one section of the crowd gathered at the scene of the fire.

It was a group of women who looked like young mothers around thirty years of age. Even though it was the scene of a fire, there was an atmosphere of enjoyment in the spectacle.

“I heard it from them. They said that woman was divorced by her husband. They said it was because she couldn't have children, but I don’t know if that was true or not. Whatever the case might have been, she lived alone since then and took ‘Mai-chan’ to the kindergarten every day for a walk. That’s how she became famous at the kindergarten, as Mai-chan’s auntie.”

“But… then that means that Mai-chan exists, right? She had a child, right?”

I made my counterargument, but –

The strange uncomfortable feeling from the story didn't allow the goosebumps on my arm and back to go away.

"When you were standing in front of the house, did you notice what was next to the front door?"

Yoishi looked at me as if she could see into the depths of my soul, making me feel a horrifying chill.

Next to the front door – Ahh, I'm sure it was…

A doghouse. And its entrance was boarded up with layers of planks.

…The name tag on that was doghouse was—

"That's right—"

"'Mai'… was the name of her dog."

"Iizuka-san used to have a collar on her dog. However, that changed at a certain point. Just like the kindergarten kids, she knit a yellow school uniform for her dog, put it in a baby stroller, and started walking it. Those people laughed at her, saying it was creepy for her to treat a dog like a human being."

Yoishi's gaze didn't waver as she pointed to the crowd of amused gossiping mothers who were watching the fire.

"I don't know when Iizuka-san brought 'Shōko-chan' home from that kindergarten. But she ended up so far gone that she didn't even notice that her dog 'Mai-chan' and been replaced by 'Shōko-chan'."

"……."

"The thing she called 'Mai' back then was no longer a dog."

I recalled the face of the woman I saw in that house, of Iizuka. I recalled her sullen eyeballs that made me reflexively think 'She was

dead, while alive'. And – when that woman shouted, 'Go over there!', the sliding paper door was indeed shut from the other side by something. That's right, it was shut intentionally by something that had a will to do so. There was no chance it was done by a dog.

"But, then… what about that DVD? Didn't Iizuka-san film that? And didn't 'Shōko-chan' show up on it?"

Yoishi shook her head in reply, 'That's not it'.

"Iizuka-san, who had no child, couldn't have been allowed to enter the kindergarten. And in this day and age, when outsiders are closely scrutinized, she should not have been able to attend a kindergarten event. That's why, there's no way that film was shot by her. And If that was the case, there could only be one reason why she would have that DVD in her possession. She was given that video by one of the mothers whose child did attend that kindergarten."

Yoishi's face contorted, as if she was on the verge of vomiting while looking at the crowd of mothers with their small children.

"And that was probably how it all began. Her own child's sunny, happy day – and she passes it to Iizuka-san, a woman without a child of her own. At first glance, it seems like an act of sharing one's happiness, but to Iizuka-san, it was without a doubt, a sad, painful, and miserable act. She might have tried returning it and throwing it away many times. On the other hand, she may have repeatedly watched that recording of children's development with mixed feelings. Then one day, Iizuka-san finally noticed. The cameraman panned the camera to the left unexpectedly, and she saw the child that was not participating in the event."

"…Ah."

"Yes, in that moment, everything changed. Iizuka-san, unable to bear a child of her own, was granted the perfect child every parent idealized: 'Shōko-chan'."

A repeated view of the kindergarten event.

Then, the image tilts to the left.

A child who should not be there appears.

“But--”

I shook my head to shake off the image in my mind.

“But then, that’s just too sad for Iizuka-san, Isn’t it?”

“It is.”

Yoishi affirmed with her face pale, devoid of blood.

“I believe it started as a small matter born from a small act of malice. But, even after finally having gained a child, Iizuka-san was just like the other mothers. She, too, wanted to show off to everyone. She wished for the existence of the perfect child she had been granted, ‘Shōko-chan’, to spread far and wide into the world.”

“Ah—so that’s why she returned that DVD to the rental shop? That’s what you meant when you said she did it on purpose?”

Yoishi nodded in agreement.

“Children who were initially wished only to be born healthy, somehow become a product of their parents' egos. The tendency to give them unusual names, unusual hairstyles, and to dress them in peculiar clothing may all be substitutes for a perverted proxy competition by adults.”

‘But…’ said Yoishi, looking up at the house engulfed in black smoke.

“Children never grow up the way their parents want them to.”

The black smoke, which showed no sign of ceasing, bellows up into the sky as if mocking the firefighting efforts.

“Is it ‘burning Shōko-chan’ now? Or ‘laughing Shōko-chan’?”[11]

When Yoishi muttered those words, I felt I heard a child’s laughter from the blazing flames.

And amidst the red, black flames that danced and wiggled, I thought

I saw the figure of a red-eyed child standing still.

Unable to bear it, I looked away.

Besides me, Yoishi quietly stared at the group of women. They must have been the mothers who gave birth to the imaginary child, and in the light of the blazing red flames, they seemed to be laughing.

“Ughhh…..”

A bitter feeling welled up from the pit of my stomach, when—

Yoishi, standing next to me, plunged down first.

Her beautiful white face was twisted in pain, and she started vomiting.

As several people frowned and looked towards us, I gently put my hand on her back.

Eventually, Yoishi raised her pale face, and asked sorrowfully:

“Say—don’t you think having kids is scary?"

Case 11: The Melancholy of the Planet

…Ugh, why am I doing something like this?

I don't think I say that every time, but I still end up saying it. I keep saying: ‘Why in the world am I doing such a stupid thing again?’

It was midnight. Or at least I thought it was. That was because the world had looked dark for a long time through the old lattice door I was peeking out of. When I came here, the sun was still shining in the shrine. I didn’t usually wear a wristwatch, so I couldn't tell what time it was. I could probably tell if I checked my phone, but as I recall, Sako Takita told me with a smirk, "You probably shouldn't use that". When I recall his pale blank face, I felt anger rising from the pit of my stomach. Didn't that bastard saying, "You shouldn't use that", mean that I actually should use it. That's how much faith I had in that priest-cum-antique dealer, I finally flicked out my phone from my pocket, and turned it on. The strong light pierced my eyes which were adjusted to the dark; I rubbed my eyes and checked the time.

November 16th, 10:07 pm. Ugh…

It can't be. It was still only 10 pm?

I thought it would have been around 2 or 3 AM by now -- there was still plenty of time until dawn. Feeling fed up, I lied down. The old floorboards creaked, and the smell of old wood pricked at my nose.

I was in an isolated building that was detached from one of the old shrines situated on the outskirts of Okutama. I was lying all alone in that moldy, narrow space surrounded by shimenawa.

Well, to be precise, I wasn't alone.

I reached out my hand, and touched it.

The rough, black object less than a meter in diameter was an earthenware pot.

And I was supposed to spend the whole night with it.

That's right -- it was my job to stay with the earthenware pot until morning, and to answer the questions it would ask at some point.

"Huh? An earthenware pot asking questions?"

You might doubt something like that, and I found it strange as well. Or rather, it was a creepy story. Because according to Sako, on this day, the 16th of December, this earthenware pot is supposed to speak for the first time in 250 years.

It happened just past noon today. I was standing in front of a small wooden house in Kanda. The tilted plank at the entrance to the store had the words Kouroudou(Bone Tower Shrine) elegantly carved into it. Apparently, this was the Tokyo residence -- and antique shop -- of Sako Takita: Krishna-san's mentor on spirit-related matters and originally the chief priest of a venerable old shrine in Aomori.

“Oi, Sako. I’m here.”

When I opened the old, poorly-fitted sliding door, I smelled a moldy odor from within. The dark interior of the store was crammed with incomprehensible objects. A Buddha statue with one arm, a hanging scroll smeared with an unknown substance, a rusted box that seemed to have been dragged out of the ocean, those sorts of things. Having recently seen a similar scene in the room next to my apartment, I grimaced and called out, “Are you here?”. But there was no response, so I had no choice but to move ahead while avoiding the stares of the cryptic antiques. As I moved further back to the interior of the shop, I heard a voice muttering something from the floor above the shop.

“…Something like this is troubling to begin with -- It won’t make much money, takes a lot of effort, and in the unlikely event that it succeeds, you get nothing out of it.”

When I peeked in, I saw a man dressed in a blue kinagashi, whose appearance was like that of a handsome actor, but who was definitely removed from the world; He tilted his head in contemplation as he kneaded something.

“…Well then, what to do now?”

“Oi, Sako.”

I raised my voice a little, and he finally looked towards me.

“….Ah, it’s you. Ummm, What was your name again…. Ah, right, right, Yamamura-kun.”

“It’s Yamada. Nagito Yamada.”

“Eh? Did you change your name?”

“Why the hell would I change it?! What’s the point of that?!”

“Is that so? Well, alright then. So, do you have something you need? I’m a little busy right now.”

“Busy?! You’re the one who called me here!”

“Eh?”

“Don’t go ‘eh-ing’ at me! Have you gone senile? You rang me out of the blue while I was in the middle of my supplementary macro-economics class! You told me you had a job for me and to come straight away!”

Of course, I cut off the call at first. Not only was I in the middle of a lecture, but there was also the fact that I had nothing but bad experiences when associating with Sako Takita. However, he kept calling, telling me it was an urgent job, and that it would be a big problem if I refused. Not for him, but rather, for the world, so to speak.

“So, what’s this job that puts the world in trouble if I say no?”

When I asked him that, Sako placed his hand on the something large

in front of him with a snap.

“It’s about this. I want you to keep an eye on this at a certain place for about a day.

“What is this jar?”

“It’s not a jar. It’s an earthenware pot of Tokoname ware.[12] There’s

not a strict difference between a jar and an earthenware pot, but an earthenware pot is said to be one that can't be carried around."

"No need to explain. More importantly, I don't know what you mean by keeping an eye on it… but is it something like that? Is there something inside?"

Sako stroked his thin beard and replied, "No."

"Well, if you say there's something inside, then there is, and if you say nothing is inside, then nothing is."

"Stop talking in circles and tell me what's inside! If it's a ghost or a yōkai or something creepy, you can forget it."

"Ah, it's nothing like that. Sako narrowed his eyes in amusement. "The *earth* is inside it."

"—Huh?"

"The earth you see, the earth. Third planet from the sun. Our home world."

According to Sako, this earthenware pot came from the storehouse of an old family in Chiba, and judging from the document enclosed with it, it was apparently an 'earth simulator' created in the Edo period.

"Well, the intellectuals of that era mostly understood that the earth was round, but they didn't understand the principle by which it sustained and contained life. It was a time when people believed in Tsukumogami[13], and that there were giant catfish[14] under the ground. Even so, they were a people who somehow understood that everything goes through cycles and that everything perishes. This was probably due to the fact that the Hoei Earthquake[15], the eruption of Fuji and other major tragedies of the era had just occurred. When will the foundation of this earth reach the end of its life? That's what some eccentric people were trying to find out. Having said that, a rangaku scholar[16] by the name of 'Kigai', who lived in the Kanda area, created this in 1763. According to one theory, 'Kigai' might have been the alias 'Fukuchi Kigai' of 'Hiraga Gennai'[17], the 'extraordinary man', but I guess that is questionable.

Although it's not impossible, because the time period and the field of study was the same -- hmm? Too long of a story? Well, I'm almost done, so listen carefully. In short, according to this document that came with the earthenware pot, there is an earth floating in this jar that was created by 'Kigai'."

"…A floating earth? How?"

"Who knows, I don't understand it myself, but that's what's written here. It's not yet complete, and it's not supposed to be opened until the time is right. The time in this earthenware pot is moving 153,300,000 times faster than our time frame, and the earth inside is still growing…Ah, please don't be shocked, I have no basis for it, of course. Well, I suppose it was a kind of alchemy for the time. From the document that was passed down, it seems to be made of various materials. But there is no scientific basis for it – Although…"

However, Sako then contorted his pale, actor-like face.

"There is one description therein that is of interest: 'This earthenware pot will be completed five hundred years from now, but it will give its birth cry once in the hundred and tenth year, and in the two hundred and fifty-fifth year, it will ask a certain question. Please, future generations. Please answer it. Then, five hundred years from now, it will definitely be born as an earth.' And so, I calculated that this year is the 250th year, and tonight is approximately the day it will ask that question."

"A-are you kidding me? It really is a monster!"

"I already told you it's nothing like that. Anyway, that's the situation, but unfortunately, I have an appointment tonight that I can't miss. That's when you popped into my head. But I know you're a little scared, and I understand your concern, so I've arranged a place for you. It's in the grounds of a historic shrine, where the enshrined deity is Yamato Takeru[18]. I've created a ward there in case anything should happen. No harm will come to you."

"You think that's enough to make me believe you?" I shouldn't have come, I thought, and was about to leave, when--

“I see. Then I have no choice.” Sako muttered unnaturally. “If you’re going to refuse no matter what – then maybe should I ask that girl. That black-haired, beautiful, young lady who resembles a bisque-doll. I’m sure she won’t refuse, and, well, it might get a little messy.

“…Ungh.”

“But she would surely end up opening it. That would mean all the hard work of our ancestors who have watched over it for the past two hundred and fifty years would all be for naught. It would be like breaking an egg that is about to hatch.”

“…So that’s what you meant when you said the world would be in trouble.”

I gnashed my teeth and looked back to see Sako smiling.

“How about 20,000 yen for the job? Just keep an eye on it until dawn tomorrow, and we’ll switch afterwards.”

…20,000 yen for half a day?

That much would help me greatly. I mean, since Yoishi barged into my apartment, I had to make food for the two of us, leaving me in dire financial straits. In addition, it might be my imagination, but be it about food, or shampoo, Yoishi seemed to have gotten cheeky recently. She’d says things like, "This spinach isn't boiled", "The meat we had the other day was fresh", "That shampoo smelled good", "My hair was silkier with that one", etc. Damn it, there are reasons why expensive things are expensive in this world. I wanted to tell her that if she was so picky about something, she should buy it herself, but if I told her that, she'd go right back to a life of snacks and not taking baths. “Even Elizabeth I, who was said to be a lover of cleanliness, bathed once a month,” she would say, trying to avoid the one bath in three days she was supposed to take. And with that, all my hard work up to this point would all be for naught.

But—having gone through the recent hopeless incidents with the girl selling ghost photographs and Shōko-chan, I’d almost completely lost confidence. What more could I do to keep Yoishi far away from the presence of the world beyond? I was lost in thought on that when I

received the phone call from Sako. And that was probably when the idea occurred to me.

“Well, what will it be?”

As if prompted by Sako’s words, I nodded.

“Alright. I’ll take it—but, I don’t need money. I want you to tell me something instead.”

“Oh? What, exactly?”

Even here, the inner conflict inside me kept repeating: ‘No, don’t do that, but is there another way?’ But in the end, I said it out loud. The man who distorted his slender face like a white fox in front of me was undoubtedly the same as Yoishi – a dweller in the depths of the world beyond. Although I was reluctant to admit it, I had a feeling that the only one who knew what to do about Yoishi… would be this guy.

“What I want to know is if there’s a way to make Yoishi smile? I want to know if I can make her live a healthy, happy, peaceful life.”

“…Oh?”

“Tell me -- Is there even a slight possibility of her becoming healthy. Krishna-san always tells me that it’s not possible. But I can't help feeling that somehow it can be done. However, it’s not going well. Without even a hint of that, I feel like she’s stepping further and further into the darkness. Even so, I still want to see her smile. She should really be able to do that. But – I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Sako went ‘hmm’ in response, folded his arms, and carefully examined my face in an amused manner.

“You must be greatly troubled if you’re asking me.”

“…Shut up.”

As I glared at Sako, “I understand”, he eventually nodded.

“I have a bit of an idea about that. If you do this job well -- I'll look into it in the meantime.”

○

--And that’s how I got here.

I was in a shrine in the mountains, where the air was cold, and where the creepy sounds of mountain birds or whatever echoed.

Soon after that, Sako made some arrangements, and a bunch of weird people gathered around us, and I was put in a car with the earthenware pot and brought to this place. It was an old shrine with only a small altar at the back, located on a path next to the main shrine.

『Tomorrow morning, I will ring the bell here, alright?』 Sako spoke as he closed the lattice door and stuck some kind of talisman on it.
『Until that time, no matter who comes or what happens, you must not peek inside the earthenware pot or leave this shrine – understood?』

And then, the people beyond the grate left.

Soon afterwards, the sun began to set, my surroundings became dark and eventually fell into complete darkness.

If I were to sleep, it would end soon, I thought, as I lay down on the bed, but the hardness of the floor made my back ache, and on top of that, the cold air seeped in from outside, not letting me sleep at all. I had no choice but to light the candle that had been arranged, and checked my surroundings once more.

It was a space around 24 sqm in size, with a draft blowing in. In the corner of the room was some simple food, a pot of hot water and a sleeping bag with a blanket. The only other things present were the earthenware pot and me.

The last signal bar on my cell phone kept blinking in and out; The

antenna was almost completely out of range. Well, that was to be expected given I was in a shrine in the back of the mountains. In short, a life of complete confinement. Together with the 'earth' or something created in the Edo period. When confronted with such a surreal situation, anyone would ask themselves why they were doing such a thing.

However, I wasn't that upset, perhaps because this was a holy sanctuary? Or perhaps because the earthenware pot was not filled with the dead or some cursed objects. I only felt boredom due to the slow passage of time. Even if this were daytime and I could look out of the grate, I would still be in a corner of the forest surrounded by a grove. It wasn't like the scenery was anything special. Not to mention it was totally dark right now, and people who have experienced the forest on a night with no moon can attest to it being truly dark. A darkness so profound you can't even see your own hands. In that darkness, you can hear the rustling of branches in the wind and the cries of wild animals here and there.

I took out my mobile phone again, because even though I had a candle, I was afraid that if I stayed idle, I would create a demon in my head anyway. I tried connecting to the internet, but the signals were too weak for a stable connection. I tried fiddling around with some apps, but stopped when I got anxious about the remaining battery. In the end, I laid out the blanket, and crawled inside the sleeping bag on top of it. As I stared at empty space, I whispered to myself, "I should have brought a book or something". My voice faintly echoed in the draft and soon disappeared. I wanted to stimulate my eardrums with sound, be it through my own voice. Because there was no one else besides me who would speak.

That's right – besides the sounds of the nocturnal birds and the rustling tree branches, there was nothing.

And this was the first time I had been alone for any extended period of time since Yoishi started living with me. For a sloppy individual like myself, living with someone always by your side was somewhat exhausting. Even in this strange space, I breathed a sigh of relief. I mean, I think everyone feels calm when they're alone in the toilet. In the same way, I breathed in and out deeply as I savored my first private moment in a long time. Then, to pass the time, I thought

about all sorts of things.

For example, why does an environment away from the eyes of others give people a sense of peace? Was it because they could re-examine themselves? Or was it because they can get away from the waves of overwhelming information? Or perhaps it's because people are always conscious of other people's gaze and are freed from them, even if they don't realize it.

But if that was the case, how do married couples in the world get by? Was it relaxing to have someone one day suddenly intrude into your space? I asked myself that if that was the case, how was I feeling living together with Yoishi? But in Yoishi's case, the situation was a little different. You didn't really feel like she was there. So, when I'm dancing and forget that Yoishi was there, I'd suddenly realize that she was silently staring at me, and I'd blush, and say, "If you have something to say, just say it," as if taking it out on her. I'm not sure if I'm dumb or if Yoishi has no presence, but at any rate, the fact that she's parasitizing in my loft in itself isn't that much of a problem. I just think it's a problem socially speaking.

No -- perhaps Yoishi was purposefully holding her breath. Maybe she was quietly trying to keep a low profile, aware to some extent that she was a freeloader in my apartment. Come to think of it, the reason she didn't buy any clothes or food was because she was trying not to put any of her possessions in my place? When she came to my apartment, the possessions she brought were next to nothing, it left me stunned and I asked her, "Is that all the things you have?" She just had her school uniform, a bag and a laptop. She might have brought a spare pair of socks or underwear (Or at least I hoped), but those possessions were so few for a girl her age it was hard to believe. I couldn't bear seeing her sleep on the hard floor of the loft in the beginning and had to buy her a futon. In the first place, Yoishi was extremely patient. And even if there was something around her she was hopeful for, she would never say it out loud. She didn't feel comfortable in this world, and she never even thought she could make it comfortable. It would have been better if I were a little more thoughtful, but I was unsure about those kinds of things. I had no idea what girls wished for.

I breathed a deep sigh.

I told Yoishi that I'd be working my part-time job today and that I wouldn't be back until dawn, and to lock the doors tight, but—

"I wonder if she's alright."

It happened right then.

Suddenly, a strange smell caught my nose. Then I heard some kind of noise close by, causing me to jerk myself up. I held my breath, and focused all my attention on my ears. It wasn't the wind. *Crunch* *crack*, it sounded like something was stepping over dead branches. Little by little, it slowly came closer to this shrine from the depths of the forest.

"…W-who is it?"

I lifted the candle stick with the candle, and peeked outside, but as expected with that level of light, it didn't reach outside the grate. Only darkness spread out of the shrine as if it had just been painted over.

Suddenly, I blew out the candle. I realized that with the candle lit in total darkness, I'd be visible from the other side. When the candle went out, a dense darkness instantly enveloped the area. At the same time, the noise of the wind and insects which I had forgotten up until now came deafeningly close.

In the midst of that, the crackle and crunching sounds slowly drew closer.

And as it came a few steps outside of the lattice door – it stopped.

My teeth began to clatter. I was only a few meters apart from the source of the sounds.

It was without a doubt, peeking at me. And there was already a foul smell in the vicinity that was enough to make me cough. Was it a stray dog? Or a wild boar? Bear? I mean, despite it being in Tokyo, were there bears in Okutama?

No—

This was not an ordinary animal. I could feel a faint sense of consciousness. Moreover, it was something distorted, something rotten, something that resembled negative human emotions. And this nauseating smell was –

Could it be… the putrid smell of a corpse?

As soon as I realized that, sweat slowly began dripping my back.

At the same time, my body stiffened as I recalled countless creepy images I had seen on occult sites that should never come to mind. My throat became parched as I felt something pale and discolored staring at me from right across the grating.

『Never enter the mountains at night.』

I suddenly recalled the words of my late grandmother.

『Gods roam the mountain at night. You must not look at them; If you do, you will end up blind.』

Grandmother, who was always kind to me, always repeated that with a scary look on her face.

Well, of course I thought it was superstition. I thought that my family's respect for the mountains and the nature of the lumber business gave birth to such superstition. But now, alone and secluded in the mountains on a moonless night, faced with something unfathomable, things like science and common sense were easily swept away.

--Should I try and light the candle?

Such a desire arose inside me. The thing I was afraid of might simply be a plastic bag of trash that flew in from the wind. That might be why it smelled like that. I was about to move my hand, thinking that If I lit the candle, and held it up towards it, everything would be fine.

…Yes. That's what Krishna-san always said. Ninety-nine percent of the paranormal in this world are lies, delusions, and misunderstandings. In short, ninety-nine percent of the fear that now occupied my consciousness was my misunderstanding. I mustered my

courage and reached my hand for the matchbox. My fingers trembled and I ended up breaking a few matchsticks, but I managed to light the candle once more. And then held up the light to the grate. The flickering flame illuminated the other side of the grating–

However, there was nothing there.

Before I knew it, the unpleasant odor had dissipated as if scattered by the wind.

As I let out a deep breath, my cell phone, which was still in my back pocket, began to vibrate and I jumped up. I rushed to take it out and found it was my university classmate, Kanta Moriyama, who belonged to the newspaper club.

〈Yo Yamida. I've been trying to call you for so long. Are you working now or what?〉

"Ooh, Moriyama, is it?"

I was thankful to the point of tears to hear Moriyama's easygoing and cheerful voice right now. I gripped my phone with both hands as if clinging to it.

"Well, my job is umm… but more importantly, I'm glad you called."

Moriyama was a guy who was a clear-cut, eloquent speaker whose appearance was like that of an actor from the golden period of cinema in the early Showa period. However, he was a bit of a celebrity in the western club building due to his Michael Jackson impersonations and his bad habit of making dad jokes that were unbefitting of a teenager, and which caused him great disrepute among the female students.

〈Huh…? It seems like the connection is bad. I can't hear you properly.〉

"Ah, sorry about that. Umm, what happened? Is there something you wanted?"

〈Oh yeah. Your second foreign language was Spanish, right?〉

“Yeah.”

〈Please, if you have a notebook, lend it to me!〉

“……”

The fear inside me was instantly erased thanks to his real life problems.

I nodded and said yes in response.

〈Ohh!! Thanks man! You’re a lifesaver! You’ll bring it tomorrow, right? I’m counting on you!〉

Moriyama was about to cut the line; I panicked and drew out the conversation for a little longer.

“Aah…. Wait a minute. Is there anything else you wanted?”

〈Anything else? Um, not really.〉

“No, well, I’m sure there’s something. Umm… Like is there a girl you like?”

〈*Eeek* Don’t ask me that out of the blue, it’s embarrassing!〉

I could vividly imagine Moriyama writhing and twisting his body on the other end of the phone as he shouted in a crazy voice,

〈There’s no one right now. I mean, those who do are lucky, aren’t they? I have an overflowing feeling of wanting to fall in love, but there are no girls around me to accept that feeling. And it’s painful when you see the world being painted in Christmas colors. Well then... 〉

“…Oooh, wait a minute.”

Moriyama and I weren’t close enough to have long conversations on the phone, but it was a different story right now. I was stuck here alone with the creepy earthenware pot in the middle of the dark until morning. If possible, I wanted him to stay on the phone with me until then.

〈Huh? You want to talk more? I guess it can't be helped. So should I come over there right now? 〉

"No, I'm outside right now. In Okutama."

〈Okutama?〉

Moriyama, who was also a struggling student, was about to hang up the phone, saying, "Are you kidding me? I don't wanna make long-distance phone calls," but I somehow managed to calm him down and pleaded with him to give me five more minutes.

〈What are you doing in Okutama in the first place? What's your job there?〉

Having no other choice, I explained it to him. The fact that I was with an earthenware pot from the Edo period in a shrine that was like a hut detached from an old temple. And the fact that I had to watch over the earthenware pot until tomorrow morning.

〈Watching over an earthenware pot? Why are you doing something weird again?〉

"…No, this thing is supposed to talk sometime today or tomorrow."

〈Talk? Uhyahyahyahya!〉

Being laughed at in a high-pitched voice, I again felt embarrassed at the ridiculousness of what I was doing.

〈Come to think of it, you were pretty knowledgeable about ghosts and yōkai, right? Did you read some strange book again? There's no way an earthenware pot will talk.〉

"I-I don't believe in it myself; I'm simply doing it for the money."

〈Hmm.〉

After making some amused grunts, Moriyama said, 'All right.'

〈Try and open it for now.〉

"…What?"

〈The lid of that earthenware pot. If you see what's inside, you'll know whether or not you're being made a fool.〉

…He was right. I then nervously stretched out my hand and touched the rough surface of the earthenware pot. Sako had said it was from the Edo period, and it did seem old. The lid of the earthenware pot was closed shut with some kind of iron, but it looked worn with cracks in various places. If one were to thrust something sharp in it, it would somehow break.

〈In the first place, how could someone from the Edo period build something like an earth simulator? I'm sure there's something else inside.〉

"Something else?"

〈Who knows – It could be a corpse or something.〉

He let out a strange chuckle as he said that – but it's no joke.

--*Open it.*

Suddenly, I felt a voice from somewhere, and a shiver went down my back.

"…No."

I shook my head.

"No way. I can't open it."

〈Why? Aren't you talking to me because you're afraid of that earthenware pot? You're afraid because you're not sure of what's inside. It's like you're having a silent staring contest with a stranger until sunrise.〉

…That's right. The more I looked at it, the more this earthenware pot seemed to look like it was around the size of a person. It felt like something was crouched inside, clutching its knees. Come to think of it, Moriyama was right, didn't I read something similar before – that

earthenware pots were originally made to hold corpses?

〈Try opening it and see for yourself. It'll be a weight off your shoulders. Come on, come on.〉

Urged on by his cheerful voice, I timidly took out my apartment key from my jean pocket, when somewhere inside of my head, something rang out. A tiny, tiny warning sound for an uncomfortable feeling I had almost missed.

"…Say, Moriyama."

〈What is it?〉

"How… do you know this is an earth simulator?"

〈……..〉

"…I…didn't tell you that, did I?"

〈……..〉

I took a gulp, and asked the silent caller on the other end of the line.

"*Who*…are you…?"

The moment I asked the question, the call was cut off.

For a while I was stunned, as I stared at my mobile phone. The signal indicator on the LCD showed no signal. I closed my phone, and plucked at my hair. Was that really a call from Moriyama just now? No – Did I really even get a call in the first place? I was too afraid to check my call log. If Moriyama's name wasn't displayed there, I had a feeling I couldn't stay in this place a moment longer. And that would mean I had backed off from this job.

As I was scratching my hair and thinking about it, my phone rang again.

With a start, I looked at the LCD screen to see 'Shiina Kurimoto' displayed on it. I felt the tension leave my body all at once, and I rushed to press the answer button.

“K-Krishna-san?”

〈--Nagi-kun, is that you? Oh, thank goodness, I managed to get through at last! Are you in Okutama right now?〉

“…Huh, h-how do you…?”

〈Takita-san told me about it…Damn it! Why did you take on such a part-time job again?! What kind of a thoughtless idiot are you?!〉

“…I, I’m sorry.”

She kept fervently cursing at me, and I couldn't help but apologize, but...

“…Em, Uhh, what does it all mean?”

〈You usually hate Takita-san so much, and yet you were oblivious this time. Listen carefully. That’s not anything like an Earth simulator, the contents are empty.〉

“…Huh?”

〈It’s probably a burial urn from the Kamakura period – in short, a coffin. It's just that it's been dedicated for so long to someone who was supposed to go in it, that it has a tendency to try and somehow make the living people around it enter inside.〉

“…Whaaaaat?”

〈It seems he hired you because he wanted to confirm if it was an item worth selling, He wanted to test its effectiveness by isolating it alone for one night with a living person.〉

“…T,T, That bastard!” I tightly gripped my phone reflexively, “In short, I’ve been taken for a ride again?”

‘It seems so’, came the deep sigh of Krishna-san from the other end of the line.

〈Listen up, I'm gonna tell you how to deactivate it right now. What makes the earthenware pot a magical object is the paper strapped across the lid and the pot. All you need to do is peel it off.〉

"…Paper?"

I drew the light of the candle close to the earthenware pot once more.

I see, the lid was indeed joined to the jar with solder, and there was an old, tattered piece of paper stuck on top of it. I felt I could easily scrape it off with my apartment key without too much trouble.

〈Yes, as long as that paper is there, that earthenware pot will have the nature of 'confining something within it'. All you have to do is to peel it off. Do you have anything sharp nearby?〉

"I have my apartment key."

〈Good, use that to open it.〉

I took the key backhanded and drew close to the earthenware pot, when I suddenly realized.

It was the call from something that claimed to be Moriyama. He, too, relentlessly urged me to open the lid of the earthenware pot. Feeling horrified, I looked up. I felt there was still something in the darkness beyond the grating, watching me.

"…Krishna-san."

〈What?〉

"About Yoishi, did you come with up any good ideas?"

〈…Yoishi?〉

"Yes. Didn't you tell me you'd try and come up with something?"

〈Why does it matter now? Hurry up and remove that pa--〉

"It does matter. It's actually the reason I took this job."

〈That's-- I'll tell you that after you've taken off that piece of

paper--〉

“No, Tell me now.”

〈……〉

A lukewarm wind blew at my feet.

The sounds of the tree branches being rustled about by the night wind outside of the shrine.

The call from Moriyama just now. And the call from Krishna-san right now. It made me recall something. A famous ghost story I had once heard somewhere – Ah, that’s it. This is…

“This is – Kibitsu’s iron pot, isn’t it?”

At that moment, the call was abruptly cut off once more.

I don’t know if that was because the signal was cut off, or because there was no call from Moriyama or Krishna-san in the first place. I didn’t even try to check. If it was really them, then they’d try and call again – and if it wasn’t them… Establishing that as a reality would shake the foundation of my heart. The paranormal is scary because of its vagueness, but in this situation, it would be best to keep it vague until morning.

I moved the candle to my feet, and covered the blanket up to my head.

I breathe. Just slow, regular, repeated breaths.

And I recalled the Okayama ghost story narrated by my grandfather when I was a child: ‘Kibitsu’s iron pot’. I couldn’t help but feel that that ghost story and the situation I was in right now were quite similar. If that was the case, then all I should do was wait until morning. Even if there was something in this earthenware pot, the only thing I should do was to be still as long as I was here. I believed that even if that were the real Moriyama and Krishna-san, it was not a relationship that could be broken by their dishonesty. Right now, all I needed to do to breathe. And to just do my best to wait for time to pass.

Just like how Karasu-san had told me—

As I breathed regularly and repeatedly, my heart became quiet and still.

I secretly took a glance at the old earthenware pot standing beside me. Then I thought of the thing that lay inside. Even if its contents were empty, or had an earth, or a monster – didn't all of those possibilities begin to materialize once I perceived of them as such? Right, it was just like the so-called 'Schrödinger cat', it only exists once it's observed. I was merely afraid of the fears I had created myself. That was what the paranormal was all about.

『Are you feeling scared right now?』

Thereupon, I suddenly recalled the words Yoishi would always say.

"…Aah, I'm scared."

I muttered as I smiled in a self-tortured way.

『Say, how does it feel to be scared?』

When the Yoishi in my imagination continued to ask me that, I thought to myself.

Come to think of it – I had been trying to answer that question with the 'fear' I was feeling, but… that wasn't it, was it? I think what Yoishi was really trying to ask me was not the nature of the fear I was feeling – but the process of actually getting there.

- Riiii

No – it was something that spoke in Yoishi's voice. I wasn't confident anymore about who was calling me from the other end of the line. Maybe that's what Sako was referring to when he smirked and told me not to use the phone. Because 'something' might try and tempt me.

However--

"…I'm in Okutama. I told you I had a job."

I answered in a somewhat hoarse tone of voice.

Yoishi was silent, but eventually asked pensively.

〈Who is next to you?〉

--Who? Not 'what'?

I thought it strange for a moment, but then I laughed. Yoishi was sharp on such things. She could see through to the truth more so than anyone in this world.

"Who do you think it is?"

〈It's… not a person.〉

"That's right. It's an earthenware pot. I don't know what's inside, but I've been told not to open it."

When I answered her as if beating her to the punch, Yoishi fell silent; I kept silent as well.

Would she tell me to open it as well? But if so, what would I make of it? The real Yoishi would open it right from the very start. If it was said that a monster was inside, she would definitely do it, and if it was said that you would be cursed if you opened it or that the world would be destroyed, she would happily do it without hesitation. That was the default mode of Yoishi Mitsurugi. That's why, even if she told me to open it, there would be nothing strange about it. With that much, I couldn't ascertain whether or not the real Yoishi was on the other end of this call.

〈That would be for the best.〉

--Huh?

〈You shouldn't open it.〉

Suddenly hearing words I didn't expect, I asked back:

"I thought you'd tell me to open it…that's weird."

〈I don't know, but – that thing isn't bad.〉

"…I see."

For some strange reason, a strange sense of relief enveloped me and my body relaxed.

"Somehow – that's the best thing I've heard since I've got here."

From that point on, neither of us said a word, as silence reigned between us.

She was probably sitting alone on the permanently spread-out futon in the loft of my apartment. Plastic bottles and snack bags were probably lying scattered around her pillow. And some lurid image might have been displayed on her laptop screen. She might have been bored, her long eyelashes downcast as she fiddled with her long toenails, and her overly refined facial features being unmanageable for her as she had her head cast down.

"It seems there is an earth inside this thing."

I finally broke the silence.

"It's said to have been made by some weirdo like you in the Edo period. But it won't be completed for a long time, 250 years from now, apparently."

〈…Hmm.〉

"But it seems it will talk today. And It's my job to answer it."

〈What will it say?〉

“Who knows. If it was me, I’d be like, ‘I’m hungry’, or something.”

When I said that, was it my imagination, or did I hear her let out a giggle?

“…Huh? Did you—laugh just now?”

〈…No.〉

“Is that so? You know it’s okay if you did laugh, right?”

〈I didn’t laugh.〉

Saying that, Yoishi said bye, and cut off the phone.

She hung up as if to say she had no more business with me, now that she had confirmed I was safe. I wanted to talk to her for a little while longer, but I guess it couldn’t be helped. I was already used to her cold behavior.

I breathed a sigh, and put away my phone. I then moved a little closer to the earthenware pot, and stuck my ear against its cold exterior. I thought I heard the roar of the sea from somewhere far away.

With my head close to it, I recalled the time I confined myself in the closet when I was a kid. Without even knowing the basics of biology, I was devotedly trying to warm an egg from the fridge. I placed it in a soft bag inside the closet, and spent countless hours warming the egg. By doing that, a cute chick would poke out its head one day, acknowledge me as its parent and become attached to me, being the first one to make eye contact with it. And then, I would call it something cute like Hiyoukichi and take care of it. Hiyoukichi would follow me everywhere, and I would put it in my backpack and take it to school. It might help me catch crayfish at the river. It might even wake me up in the morning with a peck of its beak. Hiyoukichi was supposed to be smart and pampered. I recalled grinning like that as I warmed the unfertilized egg.

I wonder if that was why—

This old earthenware pot that felt cold to my forehead felt like an

egg.

And for some reason, I felt that what lay inside of it was not a chick – but Yoishi, clutching her knees. With her long black hair waving in lukewarm amniotic fluid, Yoishi Mitsurugi seemed lonely as she floated naked. Maybe it was because, she too, was surrounded by a thick membrane that rejected everything outside her. Right, until I observed it, I was free to imagine whatever was inside. It was much better to imagine that the unsociable Yoishi was inside, as she clutched her knees.

‘What's so funny?’ she would ask inside the pale, blue light of the amniotic fluid.

‘What do you mean ‘funny’? I asked in return.

‘Because you’re smiling at me,’ she’d say.

‘Sorry, somehow I just broke into a smile,’ I answered.

I replied that it was funny to see her worrying about so many things with that small head of hers.

Yoishi turned away, as if feeling offended.

Her long soft hair danced in the water.

I gazed at her beautiful pale profile from the side. And then I apologized.

I spoke with a kindness I didn’t quite understand, one that would surprise even myself.

And spontaneously, I succeeded in finally asked her:

“Say, how did you lose the emotion known as fear?”

In an instant—

The pale, blue world darkened.

I heard a hollow bang, the sound of something blowing up.

The dark world began to spin, like the sky on a stormy night.

With a tremendous rumbling sound, the darkness swirled around like a black cloud.

Beyond that, I heard it.

It was Yoishi's voice.

An extremely feeble voice.

And then, Yoishi spoke of something terribly, terribly cruel.

Yoishi narrated the tale that made me want to cover my ears, that made me want to throw up.

She spoke and spoke and spoke and spoke.

When the long, long story finally ended – a purple world materialized.

Yoishi was floating in the amniotic fluid which had turned purple. Seeing my expression, she sadly declared that that was the reason why she didn't want to tell me. I thought about saying something. But the words wouldn't come out. My meager vocabulary ran dry like a desert in the face of a story where halfhearted consolation was meaningless. Even so, I struggled to say something. I struggled, because staying silent would mean accepting her darkness as it was. However, no words would come out. I bore the pain that made my stomach churn, and cursed my own incompetence. That was all I could do as Yoishi gazed at me apologetically.

Inside the earthenware pot--

Inside the amniotic fluid—

The naked Yoishi quietly closed her long eyelashes, as if giving up on everything.

“Yo, Yamada-kun.”

I jumped at that voice, and saw the sunlight streaming in from the other side of the grate. It seemed I had fallen asleep leaning next to the earthenware pot at some point.

“Well done. Apparently, the earthenware pot didn’t speak at all.”

Standing like a thin shadow behind the clear light, was Sako Takita.

His breath was white. He was wearing a black cloak over his blue kinagashi, with both hands in his pockets.

“Well then, it’s over now. Please come out.”

I rubbed my eyes when I heard his words, and spoke.

“What happened to the bell?”

“…Bell?”

“You said it yourself, that you’d ring a bell.”

“Ah, I said that, didn’t I? At any rate, things like bells are unimportant.”

“Go get it.”

I said it without standing up.

“The moment the bell rings is the moment this job is over.”

At the end of those words—

Darkness suddenly enveloped the area.

Without being surprised, I merely pulled the blanket up to my neck once more.

There was no doubt about it—

Yes, this was the famous ‘Kibitsu’s iron pot’.

It was an ancient ghost story passed down in the country of Harima – presently known as Okayama. A man who married the daughter from the Kibitsu shrine, but eventually betrayed her and committed adultery. The girl knew of her husband’s infidelity, yet continued to serve him faithfully to the best of her ability. The man eventually began to loathe even that behavior of hers, and disappeared together with his mistress. That was the breaking point for the girl who continued to believe and trust in the man till the very end, and she became a vengeful spirit. The man, who encountered a series of misfortunes after that, was frightened and begged an exorcist for help, he secluded himself in a shrine for forty-two days in order to chase away the vengeful spirit, but— you could call it fate or destiny, he was killed at the end. It was because he ended up being tricked by the cheerfulness of the vengeful spirit who fooled him into thinking it was dawn, and with only one day remaining, he opened the door to the shrine by himself.

I liked listening to that story from my grandfather when I was in elementary school, and I feel like that was when I started getting interested in ghost stories. And I managed to recall this story somehow. That’s why, I thought the calls from Moriyama and Krishna-san felt familiar. There was indeed a scene where the vengeful spirit in ‘Kibitsu’s iron pot’ disguises itself as one of the man’s acquaintances.

“…You think that’s gonna work?” In my dazed consciousness, I muttered. “…I don’t know who you are, or why you’re trying to make me open this earthenware pot, but this thing has already endured 250 years on its own. It has another 250 years to go, but it’s still on the path to it. I don’t know where it’s headed, but step-by-step, it’s walking its path. Do you not even have the forbearance to allow it to continue its journey?”

I whispered in the jet-black darkness.

The darkness didn’t answer back.

Dawn was never coming, was it?

Was I already lost in the midst of the world beyond?

in the midst of the endless dark world—

I heard a voice from somewhere.

『○○○○○○○○.....?』

…Huh?

『○○○○○○○○.....?』

…Ah…

…Was that it? After thinking for 250 years… the only question you finally came up with… is that really okay? Do you really want to know that…?

『○○○○○○○○.....?』

…Ah, I understand. Being here with you in the 250th year of your life must have been fate, right? I apologize for my meager words, but I will answer you with all the sincerity I can muster.

"*It's alright.*"

I spoke.

"Keep going. Don't look back. I'll watch over you. No matter what mistakes you make, no matter how hopeless you are, I will always be there watching over you. Worst case scenario, we all perish

together.”

In the darkness where endless silence reigned—

I thought I heard a clanking sound from the earthenware pot.

And I went straight to sleep as if I had passed out.

--*Riiing* The sound of a bell rings out.

The refreshing sound of a bell chimes in my surroundings, as if to wash my soul.

“Please wake up. It’s morning.”

At the sound of that voice, I realized that my left shoulder was aching inexplicably. At some point, I laid down on the hard floor using my left arm as my pillow. At the same time, my body was cold and I sniffled.

When I woke up, I saw that the grated door was already thrown open. The chirping of birds was comforting to my ears, and I stood up, as if enticed. I staggered outside the shrine. My eyes squinted at the pouring sunlight, and I breathed the clean mountain air into my lungs as much as possible.

“Did something interesting happen?” Sako asked with his hands still in his pockets.

“…Who knows.” I merely answered. I felt like it was all a dream, to the point where I couldn’t answer anything else besides that.

Hmmm, Sako smiled.

“It seems you got the answer you were looking for. Well then, shall we look forward to another 250 years?”

A sarcastic wrinkle was etched on his mouth as he looked back at the earthenware pot in the shrine. I, too, gazed at the black earthenware pot in the light of the morning sun. Even though I was with it for a single night, it felt like we had walked together for a thousand years, and I thought I'd pat it one last time before I left, when—

"Well then, please take this."

I turned around, and Sako handed me out a piece of paper. I opened it to see some sort of URL beginning with 'www' written on it.

"What is this?"

"Your reward, of course."

"No, I asked you how I would get Yoishi to…"

"And this is the answer. Or rather -- it's something connected to the answer."

After that, Sako told me even more incomprehensible things.

"I did a lot of research, and in all likelihood, Kurimoto-kun is probably correct."

"…Huh?"

"I also believe it's impossible to save Yoishi Mitsurugi-kun. However – that condition is only true, in the possibility that you are excluded. Whatever it is, it's not words. Nor an item. Time is also a requirement. The one who abandons everything will eventually gain the most precious thing – but it is an old mythological theory."

"Oi, I don't understand what you mean."

When I complained, Sako peered into my face and his cheeks contorted into a smirk.

"You know, this world is -- really, reaaaaally full of idiots, Yamada-kun."

"…Huh?"

“It’s overflowing with garbage people who can only think of themselves, who can only think in a radius of about fifty centimeters, who live only in the present and curse everything they don't understand as trivial, boring and not worth existing.”

“A-are you talking about me??”

“…Eh? No, no, no, not at all.”

Sako chuckled as he clapped my shoulders.

“You might be a fool, but you’re not an idiot. Kurimoto-kun often asks you if you’re an idiot. That is a statement that can never be directed at a real idiot, and an idiot will usually never realize or imagine that they are an idiot to begin with. But I digress. Anyway, the only thing that can save Yoishi Mitsurugi is a person who can give up everything for the sake of others. Well, I have never seen a person who can do such a thing for a stranger. Well, that's right. If forced, I’d have to say someone like Jesus of Nazareth. Well, that's just folklore, and in any case, it's a mad story.”

When he finished talking as he pleased, Sako chuckled.

“I'll take you to the station,” he said, and with a plop, he pushed me from behind and started walking towards the entrance to the shrine.

After passing through the large Torii gate, the black wagon and men dressed in black that I had seen when I arrived were waiting for me. They deftly carried the earthenware pot back into the car and gestured me inside as well. I got in, and the wagon once again rocked along the mountain road. I thought they’d take me back to Musashino, but for some reason, I alone was dropped off at Okutama station. From what I understood, they had to take that earthenware pot somewhere from that point on.

“I think it’s better if you don’t know where that is.”

Sako gave me a creepy smile, and I complied in disgust. I was already completely exhausted anyway. I thought I’d go to sleep while on the Chuo Line and go home, but I was strangely curious about the piece of paper Sako had handed me, so I took out my mobile phone in the

train and tried to access it for the time being.

I thought I wouldn't be able to access it unless I was on a computer, but it seemed to be a website compatible with my flip phone. I managed to see it, but—

…Huh?

When I scanned through every corner of that site and understood the purpose and meaning of the page—

I ended up discovering a new darkness inside the darkness that was Yoishi Mitsurugi.

"Hey, how the hell is this a hint? That bastard."

I was physically exhausted, but I couldn't sleep at all with the new mystery that had appeared in front of me matched together with my anger towards Sako. In the end, I finally reached Mitaka station at last without even a wink of sleep. I staggered and dragged my heavy feet towards the station exit, going against the flow of commuters. I finished descending the stairs and made my way to the roundabout in front of the station, when I saw a familiar shadow.

"Welcome back."

Long black hair and a black blazer uniform. It was Yoishi Mitsurugi, with a white scarf wrapped around her neck.

"A…Ah, I'm back."

I merely answered mechanically, but I was strangely happy with the conversation. Welcome back. I'm back. What nice words.

Afterwards, we silently headed through the station roundabout in the direction of Koumei institute.

"You going to school now?"

"It's bothersome."

"……."

“I really don’t feel like going, but...”

“But you’ll go, right? That’s admirable.”

Yoishi sunk into silence when I said that.

We continued to walk without exchanging a word.

But from time to time, I felt Yoishi sneaking a look at me. I somehow understood that she was trying to ask me something, and yet couldn’t. I wouldn’t speak of it until she asked me herself. That floaty, ticklish sensation in my stomach was fun for some reason.

“…What…?”

At last, Yoishi asked with a voice that was seemingly scattered by the wind.

“What did the earthenware pot…?”

“…Hm?”

“What did it ask?”

“Do you want to know?”

“…I’ll hear you out, just because.”

I tried to stop myself from bursting into laughter—

And answered her after a pause.

“It asked: Was it alright to have been born?”

Yoishi stopped in her tracks, and looked at me.

And I stopped as well.

“Surprised, right? I might have been dreaming, but it asked me that probably before dawn. That was the question it had spent 250 years refining and developing.”

Then, what did you answer?

The moment Yoishi looked at me as if to ask that question—

I realized it.

No—I had a feeling I realized it.

The reason Sako told me about that site.

And why I unexpectedly said those words to that earthenware pot.

…No, wait. I should probably think about it some more. I'm known to jump to wrong conclusions, and I was too tired to come up with the answer right now.

So, for now - I turned to Yoishi, smiled as hard as I could and said:

"What I answered -- is a secret between it and me."

Case 12: The Gravestone of a Sixteen-Year-Old

When I suddenly aimed my light towards the darkness—

The pale face of a woman appeared there.

The woman, her hair half white, stared motionlessly at me with a hollow expression on her face. I could hear my heartbeat race a mile a minute. My repeated gasps echoed and melted away in the dark room. The woman's face looked seemed to float in the air, and her eyes, which were slightly out of focus, looked as though they were seeing right through me at something unknown.

Even after I finally realized that the woman was a portrait hanging on a wall, my knees continued to tremble – and from the bottom of my heart, I wanted to cry as I thought about it every time: Why the heck am I doing something like this again? 'Give me a break', I groaned, turned the light behind me, and another pale face appeared in the pitch-black darkness.

"Eeeek……!"

When I unintentionally shrieked—

"It's too bright." I heard a voice so calm that I froze.

Yoishi Mitsurugi moved her beautiful face away from my light, and then silently passed me by without a word. The sound of her footsteps on the floor rang out in a creepy, creaking noise.

"H…hey, Yoishi. Wait for me."

Yoishi was in her high school uniform today as well. I don't know if you'd call it traditional or gothic, but it's a uniform entirely in black

with a black blazer and a black skirt, so when we come to search a vacant house late at night with no electricity, she would always completely blend in with the darkness.

“That was the first one.” Yoishi spoke somewhat happily. “And this is the second one.”

On the corridor wall where she aimed her light, was a painting. It was indeed a portrait. The same woman from before was depicted on it. The same clothes, the same hair, the same expression. Her creepy, somewhat out of focus gaze looking off somewhere was also the same, and the composition of the painting, which drew her from the top of her head down to her breasts was very much the same – but, something felt slightly off. Well, I guess that was to be expected given that they were two different drawings of the same woman.

I tried not to think too deeply about it, and followed Yoishi as she ventured further into the manor.

As I recall, no one lived in this abandoned mansion for about seven years now. A middle-aged woman who was a painter is said to have lived here. That being said, I felt that there were an unusually large number of abandoned furnishings you wouldn’t find in a normal household. Vases of a strange shape, animal shaped plates, carpets with bizarre patterns– in short, the things scattered here and there were things that only a person of a particular sensibility would enjoy.

“Where is the sixth portrait, I wonder?”

Muttering that, Yoishi crossed the hall with no hesitation in her step whatsoever.

“Why do people who see that portrait go missing? And does the sixth portrait truly exist?”

Her words, spun like a whisper, reverberated in the darkness, like a craftsman’s fingers had flicked a narrow and hard wine glass. At that moment I heard a snap from somewhere. It could have been from outside the house, or it could have echoed from the darkness right next to me. Either way, it seemed to me like someone invisible was rejoicing. And as always, I regretted my actions.

--Dammit, I shouldn't have come here.

○

It was a cold December afternoon -- the day before Christmas.

On that day, I had something on my mind, so I asked for the day off from my part-time job at the Italian restaurant. My boss and colleagues were half cold and half sarcastic, asking me If I had a date, but I still felt really sorry towards them. For some reason, the Japanese enjoy Christmas with great enthusiasm, even though the vast majority don't believe in Christianity. Moreover, tonight was Christmas Eve, a time more exciting than the day itself. For couples in society, it seemed to be customary to have dinner at a fancy restaurant on Christmas Eve, and the Italian restaurant I worked at was coincidentally very well known in the neighborhood as one such place. Understandably, the reservations were jam packed, and the restaurant employees were probably about to be in for a world of pain from here on.

I easily imagined that would be the case when I submitted my shift, but – I had suddenly realized something. At a time like Christmas Eve, I imagined Yoishi Mitsurugi's sad figure alone in the loft of my apartment, browsing occult websites. Wouldn't it at least be better to buy a cheap cake, pop some party poppers and say, 'Merry Christmas!' with some stacked cups? She might not have any interest at all in the birthday of a saint who died two-thousand years ago, but even so, a sound high school girl wouldn't be browsing occult websites on Christmas Eve. At least, not one I'd seen or heard of. And if I went to my part-time job, she would end up being reduced to one of those rare high school girls. That was far and away from the 'Yoishi Mitsurugi Rehabilitation Plan' I had aimed for. Feeling that strange sense of duty, I took the day off, despite feeling sorry about it. After my supplementary lectures at university, I headed straight back to my apartment, when I realized – I didn't exactly know what we should do on Christmas that would be enjoyable?

Should we have dinner at a fancy restaurant?

Or should we go to an area of dazzling lights filled with couples?

--It happened at that moment.

My apartment door suddenly burst open without even as much as a knock.

“Nagito, I’m glad you’re here.”

“…Oh, Ooki?”

The person grinning at the entrance of my door was my university batchmate from the art department, Mitsuru Ooki. He wore a worn-out T-shirt, a wrinkled thin jumper over it, and jeans with holes in them, his usual attire which looked to be quite cold.

“As expected, you’re at home even though it’s Christmas Eve.”

Saying that, Mitsuru Ooki shamelessly barged in without even waiting for an invitation.

“Do you know why I’m here?”

“I keep telling you, I’m not psychic. Why are you here?”

“You’re an expert on scary stories, right?”

“No, I’m not an expert.”

“Really? Aren’t you always reading creepy books in the clubroom?”

Those would be the basic occult-related material that Kirshna-san gave me. But I didn’t feel they were scary or creepy at all, probably because those research materials were academic or folkloristic in nature.

“Listen, Ooki.”

I began to explain to Ooki, who had sat down next to me with a thud before I’d realized.

“As far as the occult is concerned, liking it and being good at it are two very different things. It’s true that I do quite love to read and

hear scary stories. But if you were to ask me if I was an expert, then my answer would have to be a hard no. In fact, I'd say I'm a coward compared to the countless occult maniacs on 'Ikaigabuchi', I'm a gutless person who's especially scared of paranormal phenomenon and have no tolerance for it whatsoever, just by talking to me about a bloody woman who has a hollow gaze is enough to burn the image into my brain and make me have sleepless nights."

"I know quite well that you're a coward. But still, you have more tolerance than the average person, right? You know a lot of stuff, right?"

"I don't have tolerance, nor do I know stuff, but I still end up getting involved in the occult, that's the problem."

"Well, that's fine. I want to hear your opinion on something."

Ooki then pulled the electric heater I was using close to him and began to speak.

"There is – or, I should say, there was -- a female painter by the name of Shizue Namikawa. She's generally unknown, but from time to time, when her works are exhibited, they have a unique style, attracting interest and admiration from many experts."

"By 'was' – you mean to say she's dead?"

"Yes. She's been dead for a long time now."

I felt something strange in the way he said it, and I too sat down on the floor. It seemed like it was going to be an interesting story.

"She was a strange one, for sure. I mean, artists are known to be strange in general, but she was especially strange. She learned how to draw oil paintings by herself after crossing the age of 30, never had any solo exhibitions, and only rarely ever entered competitions around the country. However, even if she won, she'd never appear in person. Eventually, there were over a dozen uncollected prizes to her name. Then, the other day, a person in charge of the competitions really wanted to hand her the prize in person, so he sent over someone to the address where the paintings came from. That house

was close to here – but, it seemed no one had lived there for almost seven years."

"…Huh? What does that mean?"

"It means that the painter known as Shizue Namikawa wasn't in this world anymore."

"Uh huh..."

A shudder crawled up from under my feet, and I repositioned my cross-legged legs.

"The organizers checked it with the city and found her death certificate had been submitted seven years ago in August when she was 41 years of age. She was married once in her 20s, but her husband passed away. She had no other relatives and it seems she lived alone for the rest of her life. The place of her death was inside that mansion. One morning, a neighbor called the police and reported her mailbox being full of circulars and mail, and her body was discovered inside. The cause of death seemed to be heart failure, as there was no evidence of criminal wrongdoing. Since she didn't have any relatives, she was cremated by the city, and her cremated remains are still kept in the city's ossuary."

"So that means that the person who sent the picture was someone who pretended to be Shizue Namikawa – Or does that mean it was Shizue Namikawa herself, who was supposed to be dead?"

I connected the story in an unscrupulous, yet exciting way, and in reply:

"Well, the latter possibility isn't obvious to normal people."

Ooki tilted his hand to his mouth, seemingly gesturing for something to drink. I reluctantly reached out for the electric water boiler, brewed a pot of tea, and handed it over to him. He took a loud sip and grunted, "Delicious," before continuing his story.

"So that's where the official story ends, but the problem comes after that. I was working part-time with the competition organizers the other day and heard it from them directly, it seems there were a lot

of strange things about that house."

"A lot, you say?"

"There are rumors that suggest someone might still be living there."

"…Hm."

In short, I guess they want to say that it's Shizue Namikawa's ghost.

But recently, I found that I was no longer afraid of the formulaic ghost stories. Was it because I became involved in 'Ikaigabuchi' and faced real ghosts? So I arrogantly put on an air of seniority as someone experienced in the path of the occult, and spoke:

"You see, Ooki. This something a person I respect said: ninety-nine percent of the ghost stories in this world are in this world are lies, delusions, and misunderstandings. Isn't there a hobo inhabiting that place or something?"

But Ooki went "Well, hear me out," and began to narrate.

"You see, it happened just last month. All the competition organizers consulted together, and decided together with the city officials to enter that house. She was a local artist, and they thought that if she still had other paintings, they could hold a private exhibition as a memorial to her. So, as expected, they found quite a few intact paintings in the house. Among them was a quintet of paintings that were thought to be self-portraits were especially wonderful, so they were catalogued along with other conspicuous paintings, and arranged to be taken out at a later date. However, this is where things start to get strange. When the transporter came to pick up the paintings and entered the manor, he found six self-portraits instead of five."

"Huh? Couldn't it be a simple mistake?"

"Of course, he thought that was the case at first. But not only he was a transporter, he specialized in paintings. He had an eye for aesthetics far beyond that of an average person. He compared it to the catalogue, and as a result – determined that there really was one more painting after all, so he contacted the organizers to have them

check again. Thereupon, the organizer's appraiser visited the house once more, and confirmed that there was indeed one more self-portrait with the same composition as that of the original quintet. Having no other choice, he seemed to have rewritten the catalogue, however, one day, the appraiser went missing."

"….."

"Furthermore, the transporter who first discovered the sixth portrait is now missing too. He didn't come to work for a while, and a missing person report was filed by his family. After that, the selection of the next person in charge became difficult, so the talk of the solo exhibition died down. Well, I guess everyone felt something creepy about the whole thing. The painter passed away seven years ago. Despite that, her works continue to be sent into competitions. The self-portraits that increased in number at the house. And before you knew it, people began to whisper. Isn't Shizue Namikawa still inside that house?"

I unintentionally took a gulp, when—

"--How wonderful."

I suddenly heard a voice, and looked up to see a white face peering in from the loft.

"A….AGGHHHHH….!!"

Ooki, who usually moves so boldly, or what could be called a dull dragging motion, immediately flipped over, and I panicked when I saw him.

"It's here! It's here! A ghost!"

"No, calm down Ooki."

"AGHH, how can I stay calm? Can't you see it? Or are you already possessed?"

"I can see her. I can see and hear her. It's hard to deny that she's 'possessed', but she's not a ghost or anything. She has legs, eats, sleeps, and browses the internet, a flesh and blood human. Although

she doesn't take baths."

"…What?"

Ooki, who had his face covered in a cushion, finally raised his head. Thereupon, the pure white, long haired high school girl with miraculous facial features slowly descended the ladder from the loft. No, describing her appearance too positively will lead to misunderstandings, so I should mention that she slept in the loft since she came back from her high school's end-of-term ceremony today. Her black blouse was wrinkled, and her hair was disheveled in a shaggy way.

"She's Yoishi Mitsurugi, my flat mate."

"F-flat mate?"

Yoishi bowed her head ever so slightly. But it was so slight you wouldn't notice it unless you were used to it, and Ooki surely didn't notice.

"Why? Since when have you – Is she your girlfriend? And moreover, she's a high schooler? Dammit, you cunning bastard, you've been enjoying Christmas Eve, haven't you?"

He turned blue, and then red in a jiffy, what a busy guy.

"That's not it. Even though me may look like we're living together, to be honest, she's parasitizing in the loft portion of my apartment. But anyway, forget about Yoishi and please continue."

Ooki sat in the formal position for a while as he stared blankly at Yoishi, before eventually clearing his throat once, and drank the last drop of the now lukewarm tea.

"Umm, now where was I… actually, that's as far as the story goes. In short, that's how the story of Shizue Namikawa's solo exhibition was put to rest, and all that's left is a creepy rumor. Did the self-portraits that were supposed to be a quintet, really increase? What would happen if you were to see the sixth one? The person who told me was scared, saying they didn't know. So, I came all the way out here to let you know, since you really love scary stories. If you're thankful, then

treat me to something. I haven't eaten well in the past two days, so a beef bowl would be fine."

--This bastard, he really did come to scrounge some free food out of me.

As I glared at Ooki's sloppy face—

"Say, is it alright if I ask you something?"

Yoishi suddenly interjected.

"Does that self-portrait only have a face? Or is it from chest up or a full body portrait?"

Ooki answered, somewhat taken aback by the sudden question.

"Umm…. No, sorry, I didn't ask that much."

"Did anyone else see it? Are the appraiser and the transporter the only ones missing?"

"There were probably more people who entered the Namikawa residence, but those two were the only ones who appraised the painting… the others probably didn't see the sixth self-portrait. I didn't hear about anyone else disappearing."

"—Hmm."

Yoishi whispered that much as she fell silent. Eventually, she staggered up and went back into the loft. As she was climbing the ladder, I was worried her pants would be exposed through her short skirt, but Ooki too was an innocent guy who intentionally averted his eyes.

"…I know I'm late to say it, but she sure is beautiful."

"Well, her appearance anyway."

"Where did you meet her?"

"Where? There's no other answer besides her springing out from an

occult site, is there?"

"Springing out from?"

While we were talking in hushed tones, I heard the laptop computer being booted up in the loft, and the sound of vigorous keystrokes eventually started to emanate. Apparently, she was searching for something. And that clacking noise made me recall something.

It was the strange website Sako had told me about in exchange for the job I did. The shadily titled, 'Heaven on earth', was a website of negative people devoted to propagating negative words and deeds, in short, it was a site for assembling those who wished to commit suicide. And the person with the handle 'Lost child', who was treated as their queen – seemed to have been Yoishi. How I surmised 'Lost child' to be Yoishi was due to her deep spiritual knowledge, and her peculiar manner of speech. Words like "It's strange," and her unique way of ending sentences, which doesn't conform to the speech patterns of girls in this day and age, and which was definitely not used in writing.[19] And even there, Yoishi a.k.a 'Lost child', spoke indifferently of death. And her unique views on life and death, as well as her spiritual knowledge were popular with those netizens who excessively glorified death. When 'Lost child' logged in, they started posting 'Descent' like a cult, as if some god had descended.

--What the hell was she was doing at a place like this?

At the time, I was shocked, disgusted, and a little aggravated. I didn't know why I felt aggravated at the time, but for the time being, I read all past posts from 'Lost child' related to death on the website. And – what I found out, was that this site was a little different from the suicide websites that were currently popular. Rather than being a place to gather a suicide buddy or to encourage suicide, the atmosphere was more like that of a university seminar in a sense, with everyone discussing the afterlife and those who had found the answer left (or perhaps committed suicide?). And instead of a professor, the person leading the discussion was 'Lost child', a.k.a Yoishi.

To those who longed for death, 'Lost child' did not praise suicide, nor did she denounce it, she merely continued posting her views on life

and death with indifference. But at times, her words had a strange gravity about them. As a result, the number of people like me who had been caught up in them had multiplied, and the site thrived as a result.

What will you do if someone triggered by your words really did commit suicide?

Or was that not a problem since the site was only for people who were suicidal to begin with?

I didn't know. Anyway, taking a glance at her old posts, the feeling I got was that Lost child's occultic posts were interesting for the moment, and that there was a strange equilibrium there, as if someone who came here to commit suicide was discouraged from doing so.

As I drew that memory in my mind—

I heard Yoishi's voice saying, 'hmm', up from the loft.

"—Did you figure something out?"

"The name of the atelier is 'Grave keeper'."

"Grave keeper?"

"I found out when I saw the address, it's a solitary place behind the Tokyo Metropolitan cemetery. Maybe that's why."

After that, Yoishi's face suddenly peeked out from the loft, and I realized. Her eyes had that bewitching glow about them. The hollow glass bead-look in her eyes was absent, and instead, a dark colored light shone within.

…Oh shit.

What was I gonna do if she asked me to go there? Until now, I had thought that Yoishi was pushing ahead to the world beyond to regain the feeling of 'fear' she had lost for some reason or other. And I thought I'd sort of accompany her in this rescue operation. However, now that I had found out about that site – what if Yoishi yearned for

death itself? Wouldn't that change the meaning of the haunted spot investigations?

Yoishi then asked me something incomprehensible:

"Say, have you heard of Hilbert's infinite hotel paradox?"

"Hilbe…what?"

"David Hilbert. A German mathematician who died seventy years ago. The twenty-three Hilbert problems he presented in 1900 led to the Riemann hypothesis, a theory that stands unsolved to this day in the world of mathematics – but leaving that aside. The problem is the theory of infinity he proposed."

"…I don't know what you mean, but, say, could you come down here to talk. My neck hurts like this."

Me and Ooki still had our heads looking up at the ceiling. However, Yoishi ignored me and continued speaking while looking down on us.

"To explain it in simple terms, it's a though experiment which states that there exists an infinity larger than any infinity. For example, say there was a hotel with an infinite number of guest rooms. But all the rooms are full. At certain times, a new guest will arrive. Because of the rooms being full, the hotel shouldn't be able to accept any new guests, but the guest insists on staying. What would you do if you were the manager of that hotel?"

"…"

I looked sideways at Ooki who had a foolish look on his face. He shrugged his shoulders in silence, so it couldn't be helped, I answered after putting my fist to my lips and thinking it through.

"What to do, you ask… but there really is no other choice here."

"No, you can still allow them in."

"Allow them in? But the rooms are full, right?"

I rebutted while raising my head, and Yoishi spoke while looking

down at me.

“The answer is to move the guests to the adjacent room in order. If you did that, the first room will become empty, allowing a guest to enter.”

“…Hey, that’s cheating.”

I said something like that – when I realized.

“Ah…I see, so it’s a paradox because the number of rooms is supposedly infinite?”

“That’s right. You must be relieved after listening to the solution now. A hotel like that can’t exist in reality, it’s simply a thought experiment. it’s definitely never the case, but--”

Yoishi’s voice abruptly turned to a whisper, and a sudden chill came over me. It was as if the strong cold outside blew into my room alone. It felt as if something would once again shake the earth I stood on.

“But what if something similar to that did occur in reality? Right, for instance, in the atelier with the title of ‘Grave keeper’.”

“……”

“Say, do you want to know?”

I took a gulp and shook my head.

“I don’t want to know.”

○

But -- in the end, Yoishi and I were once again at a place like this late at night.

Soon after that, Ooki left with a dumbfounded look on his face. Well,

if somethings impossible for you, then it's best to give it up right then and there. A normal person would shake their head when asked something like "Would you like to visit the rumored artist's mansion when the streets are dead late at night?". So, the abnormal Yoishi and I, barged into the creepy mansion late at night on Christmas eve with pocket lights in hand. We were wandering around the large mansion with the smell of old wood and a lot of dust.

"Brr…it's freezing."

The house was strangely cold, maybe because of a draft coming in from somewhere, or maybe because it had the creepy characteristic of a haunted place. It's true that temperatures in Tokyo had dropped dramatically at the end of December, but it was so cold that even the tips of my toes were painful and numb.

As I looked at Yoishi's slender figure moving ahead of me without even a coat–

I breathed into my hands while the floor creaked as I went. However, I couldn't really concentrate on the haunted spot investigation today. That was surely because the suicide applicant website I learnt of from Sako weighed heavily on my mind.

--Why was Yoishi on that site?

Was she, too, drawn to the other world? Did it mean that she was more interested in the world beyond rather than just the paranormal? However, up until this point, it felt like she had many chances to die. And in those chances, she wouldn't have to physically stop any of her biological functions. For example, in that dream mansion of mine, or in the underground labyrinth of the Koumei institute – I had thought that far, when it suddenly occurred to me. Huh…wait a second? Was I the one who destroyed all those chances? She had wanted to fall into the world of the abyss, and yet, was I the one who ended up pulling her back into this world? Was she actually unhappy at my actions?

As I ruminated on such things—

I heard a crack ringing out beneath my feet, causing me to raise one

foot with an eeek.

A broken flower vase lay there. It seemed I had trampled on it with my sneakers.

I felt ashamed about mindlessly barging into someone's home every time, but that's how it was with searching abandoned places. There may be broken glass scattered about in the dark, and if by some chance that you were discovered, you'd have to make a run for it. That's why I always apologize internally, "I'm sorry, I'm really sorry," as I move ahead while wearing my shoes. Krishna-san always told me to have respect for the deceased – and though it was true that no one had lived here for a long time, this was once a treasured place where someone lived and spent their days.

I gently moved the broken pieces of the vase to the corner and bowed.

And at that moment—

I suddenly felt someone's gaze behind me.

I turned around and aimed my light, to see the swaying shadow of ornaments. I felt like the shadows were one too many when compared to the number of furnishings. Suddenly, I felt a dull pain in the back of my ears, and a cold chill ran through my back and transmitted through the rest of my body.

"—S, say, Yoishi."

I took a gulp and called out to Yoishi, who had already moved further down the hallway.

"I know it's too late to ask now. But do you know of the Youth Protection Ordinance?"

However, Yoishi neither stopped in her tracks nor looked back.

"In short, society isn't so lenient as to let a high school girl live together with a university student. You living together with me makes me culpable to a crime, and I'd lose the trust of society which I could never regain. In the first place, that apartment is for bachelors

only, and it's forbidden for two people to live there together."

I regularly said that kind of thing to Yoishi, to the point where it was something she was fed up of hearing. It had already been three months since we started living together, and even though it was forbidden to get used to this type of life, the simple reason I purposefully talked about it in this pitch-dark place was because I was afraid. If I kept talking for now, my fear would diminish.

"You're trying to look for a new room, right? I don't know if you've forgotten, but I'm only letting you stay at my place because you don't have anywhere to go. You know we can't continue living together forever, right?"

However, Yoishi continued walking without looking back, so I stomped past her down the creaking hallway, aimed the light at her face, and spoke:

"Hey, wait! Even if, hypothetically speaking, we must live together, there would still have to be manners and rules."

"….."

"You should properly dispose the bags of snacks and plastic bottles that you finish eating and drinking. Also, it's time to get those uniforms cleaned. I'm lending you my jersey to sleep in, so don't sleep in your uniform."

"Ah, how annoying."

"W-what did you just say?"

"Why must you always annoy me about it?"

Yoishi spoke as she focused her light at my face in opposition.

"Why…that's, you….?"

I was about to say that it was a part of the 'Yoishi Mitsurugi plan' – before I held my tongue.

The plan was already in shambles, and now that I had seen that

website, I didn't see the point in what I was doing. That's right – the reason I was feeling dissatisfied and irritated with that site was because of Yoishi's handle, 'Lost child'. She had used her real name, even on Ikaigabuchi up till now, yet why would she choose a handle name now? It was because she didn't want the people she associated with in her daily life – being me in this case, to not know, and she wanted to be able to express her true feelings without reservation to anyone. Furthermore, did that mean that she didn't want to tell me her true thoughts? That was too cold towards me, who had thought of her as a 'war comrade'.

Even so, was there any meaning in me accompanying Yoishi to yet another haunted spot? And how much longer should I keep doing it for? Was I afraid that she would die? Was I afraid she would end up broken? Was it a sense of responsibility of not being able to abandon her after getting to know her?

Once I think I've abandoned something, it leaves an extremely bitter aftertaste. Even now, I was still worried about Akane Nanamori. Yoishi had said that the girl selling ghost photographs didn't have long to live. It might be true because she said it, but Akane Nanamori was still just a young kid, who should enjoy a long, long life from now on. Even now, it weighed heavily on my mind, wondering if there was still a way to save her.

--As I thought such thoughts, Yoishi muttered.

"You're surely the clingy type."

"…Eh?"

"As soon as you become someone's boyfriend, you'd be the type to spend twenty-four hours a day asking where did you go? Who did you meet? What are you doing tomorrow? What are you thinking? And so on. The clingy annoying type that interrogates and pries through each and every detail. As a result, the type who'd make things worse by depending too much on your girlfriend, who starts stalking her, and resorts to violence in the end."

"….Y,y,y,you bitch."

Without even knowing what others are thinking – that's really all you have to say? You'd really say that to someone who's in tears and accompanying you to a haunted spot? Without care for the place or the situation, I shouted:

"You! Don't you think you're a waste? You really are a fine person. Aren't you really pretty? Isn't the reason you stand out at school because you throw up and scatter a sour smell everywhere without care for your surroundings? If you took a bathed properly and acted normally – you'd be beautiful enough make ten out of ten heads turn in a crowd."

"There's no meaning to appearances. In the first place, isn't the only reason you're associating with me is because you think I'm so damn pretty? Isn't the reason you go to haunted places with me is because you think I'm breathtakingly beautiful?"

…You, would go that far?

I was flabbergasted with my mouth open — when Yoishi suddenly stopped moving.

She looked my way, as her large eyes opened even wider.

"W-what's wrong?"

I called out to her, when I realized. I noticed a shift in Yoishi's gaze. I thought her large eyes were staring at me, but they were instead pointed at the side of my face – in short, they were looking right behind me.

"Wa—you, where are you looking….?"

I felt a chill down my spine as if I had been doused with cold water, and reflexively crouched, when—

"There it is."

Yoishi aimed the penlight behind me. Having ended up crouching down, I timidly turned around –

That woman was there.

There, perhaps, was the self-portrait of Shizue Namikawa hanging on the corridor wall.

“This is the third one.”

After exhaling a deep breath, I too aimed my light there.

It was a framed self-portrait about 700 x 600 cm in size. Inside the wooden frame, that middle-aged woman was there. Her pale face was filled with what could be called a hollow expression, and both of her eyes were strangely slightly out of focus as she stared at me.

“The style of painting is changing.”

“…Style of painting?”

“The self-portrait in the drawing room right by the entrance had a somewhat realistic style. However, beginning with the second portrait, the emphasis was put on colors, and the primary colors are even more striking in this third one. The Fauvism-like uninhibitedness strongly permeates this work.”

As I cocked my head in puzzlement, Yoishi started walking ahead. Her footsteps creaked the floorboards of the dark, narrow corridor as she moved her feet towards the darker depths of the mansion.

Having no choice, I made to follow her, but the further I went, the less I understood the structure of this mansion. From the outside, it didn’t look like a large mansion, but instead seemed to be a long and narrow arrangement of rooms in the back. It was connected with the forest at the back of the cemetery, and the mansion was surrounded by thick and tall zelkova trees. That might have made it hard to get a full picture of the mansion. The ceiling was high, and it might have had an attic, but it was a single-story house in the style of a western mansion.

“This is the fourth.”

Eventually, Yoishi spoke at the center of the slightly open living room at the end of the hallway. At the end of her aimed pen light, was indeed a similar self-portrait in a frame. However, when I saw that picture, I gulped. This time, even as someone ignorant about art, I

could tell. The style of painting was definitely different. The subject was drawn in a somewhat more distorted style, making it look like it was the work of a different artist altogether.

“I don’t understand it well, but it’s like that, right? The series of self-portraits are intentionally drawn in the same composition, but in different styles.”

“Right, intentionally done.”

Yoishi then repeated in whisper.

“And how much of it was intentionally done, I wonder?”

--How much? What did she mean?

Most of the things she spoke of were cryptic, but she then said something even stranger.

“Why did Shizue Namikawa name this place ‘Grave keeper’?”

“Huh?”

“To begin with, no one knows when and how the occupation of a grave keeper first arose. The most common theory is that it was created to protect the bodies buried in the ground from dogs and crows, but there are also other theories that it was created to protect the relics buried with the dead in the coffin - necklaces, rings, and other precious metal items. However, the commonality in those myriad theories is that the grave keeper is an existence that is the antithesis of a grave robber.”

Saying that, Yoishi turned back to me.

“Say, don’t you think it’s strange? In the age of burials, a hole was dug in the ground, and the body was buried in a wooden coffin. The wood would eventually rot and turn to dust. The same went for corpses. If that’s the case, a strange thing happens. Where did the space they had secured go when they disappeared with the earth?”

“No, where you ask – but the body and the coffin turned to dust, right? In short there’s no such thing as a space. It turned into dust as

is, right? It all comes out even."

"Maybe so."

Yoishi answered somewhat happily, as if she had already guessed my answer.

"There must always have been a cavity between the corpse and the coffin so that precious metals and other relics could be placed in it. So, the total volume of the coffin crate and the body is definitely smaller than the total volume originally secured by the coffin's outer crate. In other words, after a certain amount of time has passed, the grave should be hollow underneath."

No, but that's…

Still, I thought. The grave might have indeed collapsed with the passage of time. It may have been the grave-keeper's job to pour earth over it again and stamp it back into place.

I was about to object with that argument – but stopped at the last moment when a thought struck me. Right now, I had that original thought inside me. I felt like it was the reason I stood her now. But what if I were to say it out loud and Yoishi would deny it all again completely with the theory of the world beyond? At that moment, the place I stood would surely collapse. Something would end up tumbling and flipping over. Not to mention the fact that this was a place the supposedly dead artist lived, and it was close to midnight. I should keep the last thoughts to myself and keep my mind safe—

That was the answer I had reached after wandering with Yoishi many times in the depths of the world beyond.

When I looked up, Yoishi wasn't there anymore. I raised my light in a panic and moved ahead. She was standing in front of a door a little further ahead. She stopped while clutching the brass doorknob, which gave off a dull light.

"Is something wrong?"

I called out to her, and Yoishi turned her pale face towards me. And after that, she silently aimed the light at my back – at the path I had

come from.

“…W,what is it? Was something there?”

Yoishi continued to stare at the darkness beyond with those dark eyes of hers, but—

“…It’s nothing.”

She shook her head in the end. And in a single breath, flung open the door.

- Creaaaaak* -- An unpleasant wooden creaking sound rang out in the surroundings, and I involuntarily shut my eyes. It was because I sensed something oozing out together with the dust from behind the door. However, I sensed Yoishi had moved ahead, so I slowly opened my eyes and took deep breaths as I followed her.

The moment I entered the room, an acrid smell pricked at my nose.

This… was that. The smell of turpentine oil used in oil paintings.

“It seems this was the real atelier all along.”

As Yoishi said, it was a space around 24 square meters in size. Illuminated by the light, an easel and a wooden stool stood out at the center of the room. There was a single window on the right side of the room, covered with thick, sooty curtains. On the wall to the left were several works of art, some completed, others that were obviously abandoned. And on top of those large and small canvases laid out on the floor – the painting was in the center of the white, plaster wall.

“This is the fifth portrait.”

Yoishi stated indifferently – but I didn’t know anymore. It was blended with countless colors to the point where it was only consistent with previous paintings in Shizue Namikawa’s outline, her hairstyle, and the strange look in her eyes.

“…Say, Yoishi. Just what was Shizue Namikawa trying to do? Why

did she go to the trouble of drawing these paintings in a different art style?"

Yoishi responded in a whisper:

"Just as writing has an aspect of organizing thoughts, so does painting. Shizue Namikawa might have been trying to extract something by repeating the same motif again and again. If I had to say, I'd say that this is an abstract painting, but they are far from the cubism and expressionism of Picasso and others."

With that somewhat difficult reply, Yoishi focused her light elsewhere.

"And from here on, if we were to find a self-portrait, it would be the sixth one in question, but—"

Yoishi then spoke in a whisper, 'It's strange'.

"…W, what is?"

"There are no other doors in this room."

"Huh?"

"The rooms end here."

Hearing that, I, too, aimed my light at the surroundings to confirm.

Sure enough, I didn't see any other door besides the one we entered through. Which meant that this canvas hanging on the wall right might have been the sixth painting. Saying that, I crouched down, aimed my light, and checked the discarded pictures one by one. Yoishi soon crouched down next to me, and we both checked all the paintings together, but in the end, none of them were portraits, but rather, landscapes and pointillism.

"…It's not here. So, isn't that all there is to it? The rooms end here, and the sixth painting never existed in the first place, right?"

I spoke praying somewhat that that was the case – however, Yoishi had her arms crossed, and her fingers on her lips as she thought

about something.

“It's not like those two disappeared because they found the sixth painting, it might have just been coincidences piled together. Those kinds of countless misunderstandings often accumulate and circulate in the form of a ghost story--”

“Wind.”

However, Yoishi suddenly announced that as she began to survey her surroundings.

“The air in this room is moving.”

She muttered, and began to walk around the creaking floor, eventually she moved one easel out of the way and crouched before the wall. She then began to feel around the wall here and there.

“Here – these boards are different from the wall. They’ve been painted with the same color so it’s hard to tell, but this might be a sliding door.”

She declared, and without waiting for my answer, she quickly began to move the stuff on the other side of the easel.

“See, there are signs that the floor has been cleaned of dust. It means that someone other than us has opened it recently.”

“Was it the people who disappeared?”

I asked with a gulp, and Yoishi replied:

“Say, did you feel a sense of discomfort when you heard your friend’s story?”

“…Eh?”

“For example – the fact that the transporter was the one who discovered the sixth portrait before the appraiser.”

Her words sent a chill down my spine.

The words Yoishi Mitsurugi always spoke. 『The real ghost stories had a sense of discomfort about them.』 『A sense of discomfort as if something important has been skipped over.』

“How could the transporter find the sixth portrait even though the appraiser only counted five? Perhaps that was because he was a specialist in transporting paintings, so he persistently checked that painting in comparison with the others. In short, he felt the need to check the other paintings to make sure there wasn’t another self-portrait among them. Was that all the paintings there were? Were there any other rooms? And that is when he found this – and entered. And, without a doubt, it was the same for the appraiser who learned of the existence of the sixth portrait.”

As her words reached my ears, a terrible sweat broke out all over my body.

The cold air was rising, and a chill ran through my back – Yoishi traced her hand along the wall, found a small hole, put her finger in it and dragged it sideways. A terrible *screech* sound rang out, and beyond the darkness, an even darker darkness appeared.

It reminded me of the black of the black sea I had once seen.

And, in front of that pitch black darkness that was seemed to pull me in, I suddenly remembered.

Come to think of it, that time we played ‘Dear Nostradamus-sama’ in the club room, I – That’s right.

Didn’t I inadvertently take my hand off the ten-yen coin? It’s far too late now, but that didn’t cause any problems, did it? If something terrible were to happen from here on – no, wasn’t I already in the ‘abyss’ as Yoishi put it…?

“Say…Let’s stop.” I spoke at last as my voice trembled.

The portraits, which looked like pictures at first were taking a bizarre turn. As I checked them one by one in this dark house, I began to be seized with strange thoughts. It was as if this house was inside the mind of the painter – no, it was as if I was engulfed in the whirlpool

of thoughts left behind by the painter.

The fifth painting was strange in the first place. If I were to end up seeing the rumored sixth one, I felt like something would end up happening.

“Well, it’s fine if you want to stay here.”

“….”

“I’m not forcing you to do anything.”

Yoishi spoke in the same snide manner as earlier, stooped over somewhat happily and ventured deeper into the darkness.

--Ah, that’s right.

I muttered somewhat desperately to myself.

It’s just like you said, one’s life and wandering around haunted places are all one’s own responsibility. I wish I could do the same. It’s something I think about every time, I always want to turn back one step short of the breaking point of my limits. If I don’t do that, then one day, my mind will surely collapse. I would someday be swallowed by the darkness of the world beyond.

--And yet – why do I always fail to do that? Why do I keep following the girl who’s entranced with the world beyond, who searches for the true face of fear?

That was surely because I thought of her as a war comrade. She came to help me in that dream mansion, the source of my greatest fear. I’m still here thanks to that. And – I realized something there. Something had happened in Yoishi’s past. Something so terrifying that the feeling of ‘fear’ itself was snatched up from its roots. That’s why I had made the decision to stand by Yoishi’s side, just like how she had done for me. Even if I couldn’t help her solve the fundamental problem, I promised myself that I would at least share half the burden she carried. Even though my commitment wavered at times, I still wanted to protect that much somehow, for as long as I existed. That’s what I always thought.

However—that was dependent on a condition.

That she, herself, treated it as a problem to be solved.

That's why I was irritated when I learned she was hanging around that suicide website as a 'Lost child'. I had been working hard for her rehabilitation, and yet, if she herself yearned for death, it would all amount to nothing. My actions, my resolve, my determination, would be nothing more than tilting at windmills, and moreover, Krishna-san's words would turn out to be true: 「Those who are entranced by the depths of the darkness cannot be saved.」

I suddenly recalled the negative thoughts plastered over a portion of the suicide website.

Of course… there had been many times when I wanted to throw my life away. But there were just as many times I was thankful to be alive. I am sure that both feelings would come alternately in equal proportions in the future. I live my life with the hopeful expectation that If I could get over the tough times now, then better times would surely be waiting ahead for me.

But, seeing the countless words posted on that site, I realized how naïve I was. On that site were endless stories of parental abuse, the cold betrayal of close friends, and the relentless abuse of teachers. A feeling of loneliness as if the world was telling you that you are nothing, and filled with an emptiness that took away the color of this world. I, too, might one day end up envisioning death as a sweet fantasy when thrown into that whirlpool of despair. I, too, might end up wanting to run away from everything.

There is an argument in this world that people who commit suicide are weak. Even I think that sometimes. But the basic premise that all humans should know is—

That no one chooses death by nature.

There is a harsh reality in which people are driven to the point where they can only choose 'death'. They stand on the edge. The slightest push would be enough for them to choose death.

And strangely enough, 'Lost child' was the bulwark keeping them at bay. No, they themselves were acting as a bulwark against each other. That might look like licking each other's wounds to an outsider who has never thought of dying. But still, they're keeping a balance at the edge. And that balance is in no danger of collapsing. For them, the collapse of the balance might be the push on the back they need to change their fate to death.

That's right -- could it be that they are... Always giving it a try?

Aren't they constantly ‘testing’ their fate in some way?

They always want to ask someone whether they're better off alive or not, whether it was alright that they were born or not, isn’t that why suicide applicant websites keep popping up?

Come to think of it, Akane Nanamori also said it when I asked her about Yoishi. That "She might simply be giving it a try." And "Because I'm the same."

That means that, in short…

"I want to get to know you a little better from up close."

At that moment, I finally recalled the line Yoishi spoke when she came to my apartment.

Those were the words she spoke. Was she ‘testing’ me by stepping deeper into the abyss, where there is no help? How far could I follow her -- How much of her darkness I could be exposed to before I would let go? Was that the thing she was desperately ‘testing’ up until now?

"—Dammit!"

I took a gulp and then – I shouted, “Dammit,” out loud, once more.

“This…goddamn idiot was…”

I cursed out loud and plunged into the mouth of darkness that lay in front of me.

“Hey, Yoishi, wait. I’m coming.”

However, I stopped in my tracks the moment I jumped in.

I thought Yoishi might have moved further ahead already, but there she was. It really seemed as if she had melted into the darkness with her penlight turned off.

….Heeey, don’t scare me like that!

I was about to say out loud, when–

“--Why?”

With her head hung down, Yoishi asked me.

“Aren’t you afraid right now?”

“…Eh?”

“You’re scared out of your mind, aren't you? And being scared is something that should be quite painful for a normal human. Why do you move forward in the face of that pain?”

That was—

Because I couldn’t leave you alone, or because I didn’t want to end up hating myself, or maybe because I was really interested in the occult. I could think of countless reasons, but I felt none of them were appropriate, so I said, “Shut up.”

“Waiting alone in a place like that is way scarier. I mean, telling me you’re not forcing me to do anything -- so you're saying that your occupation of my loft is not forcing me to do anything? With the words you utter by calculating the endurance of my occult-loving nature, aren’t you the one who always forces me in tears at the end?”

Giving those absurd arguments, I aimed my light at the darkness.

“Come on. Let’s get this over with.”

I grabbed Yoishi’s hand, and continued forward.

To a somewhat hesitant Yoishi, I declared:

“Give up already.”

“…..”

“I might be annoying, and I might have the temperament of a stalker. But I’ll always be by your side.”

“…..”

“If you don’t want that, then work hard. The day you can smile cheerfully is the day I’ll stop being annoying.”

With those words, Yoishi gently gripped my hand in return.

And in the darkness-- we began to walk.

We began to walk towards the darkness, one that we might have to face in the near future.

“In all likelihood, I believe it leads to a barn.”

Yoishi eventually muttered and passed me by to lead the way into the darkness.

A moldy odor prickled my nostrils.

Something soft caught my face.

I realized it was a spider web and hurriedly brushed it off with my hand.

The darkness was immensely dense. A hole that seemed to lead to hell – no, it was the slope that connected this world to the next, Yomotsu Hirasaka.[20] I felt as if I was descending down that slope. Although I'm ashamed to say this so soon after speaking with such bravado, but I was already regretting it. …Ah. Just recently, I had

managed to get through a situation like this. In the basement of the Koumei Institute, that infinite corridor where this world and the other world seemed to merge. Why was I wandering in such a place again after throwing snot everywhere and escaping death from the scruff of my neck? It was hard to believe that this place was in Musashino or Tokyo. I don't think It was a place where people would live anymore.

"If there is a sixth portrait, it should be close by."

As Yoishi finished speaking, the ceiling suddenly got taller. I felt the intimidating air around me suddenly decrease. When I aimed my light, I saw a space of around 13 sqm.

The floor was bare earth, and a worn-out spade leaned against the rough wooden planks that made up the wall. There was also a dirty stepladder. It was indeed a barn just like Yoishi had said, and I finally breathed a sigh of relief seeing traces of a place once inhabited by humans.

But--

I turned my face where Yoishi silently aimed her light, and my body froze.

There was a forehead there. A frame in the same shape as the previous five portraits.

And in the center of it – on a white canvas, was that woman.

Drawn in the same position, she looked at me with her distorted gaze. She looked at me, as if pleading something directly to my brain.

This was, in short—

"The sixth one."

Yoishi declared with an ecstatic expression.

But – but, I didn't know anymore. I don't know if it could be called a painting. I never saw a painting in such a style. The outlines were so blotchy and crumbled that you couldn't tell if it was a painting by

Shizue Namikawa without prior knowledge. The area around her eyes was dark. It was so dark I didn't know what kind of pigment was used to express such a black color, but her gaze was clearly directed at me. There was a passionate will pleading to me for something, with a darkness that was enough to pull me in.

"…How wonderful."

Yoishi spoke with an ecstatic expression, however, I was, as expected, in tears.

The earth was shaking.

My knees were trembling to the point of making a sound.

--I didn't want to be here anymore. Not for a second longer. That was the warning sound blaring inside me. I shouldn't look at this picture anymore – and that it didn't belong in this world.

Did she sense my body shivering relentlessly?

"Let's leave."

Saying that, Yoishi pulled my hand.

And then, as if to lead me above water from the deep ocean depths where I was about to drown, she pulled me, and ran.

And as if entrusting everything to the feeling of her cold, soft hand – I ran as well.

○

The shadows of the tall zelkova trees stood in a row, the clear night sky spreading out above them.

I didn't remember how far or where we had run to.

Before I realized, I was in a dense covering of grass thick enough to

make me choke.

The chirping of insects reverberated around me. There, I repeated breaths deep enough to monopolize all the oxygen around me. I inhaled oxygen as if it were such a delicious thing, and I spat out all the ominous things trapped inside my lungs. I was freed from the feeling of being trapped, of something hanging right above my head, and the feeling of pressure as if my body was being twisted into something, a hollow smile soon appeared on my face, and I even let out a laugh.

“We can leave from here.”

I raised my head to see Yoishi standing in front of me, staring off into a dark thicket. It seemed that barn had an exit, and instead of going back all the way through the house, we exited straight out.

“---Where…is this place?”

I looked around once more as I asked, but Yoishi began to walk without saying a word; Flustered, I followed her.

Yoishi Mitsurugi bravely straddled ahead through the thicket. Even though it was a moonlit night, we continued on a path so rough I could only find it by shining a light at my feet.

The path gently sloped down.

How far are we going? I was about to ask, when my vision abruptly widened.

For a moment, I thought I had come to the sea.

However, when I looked closely, there were countless gravestones silently lined up.

Ah, this place is…

it seemed to be the southern end of the K cemetery managed by the Tokyo Metropolitan government, which had over 40,000 gravestones, and covered an area of around 650,000 sqm. [21]

Yoishi and I stood motionlessly under the dark sky facing the gravestones that stretched to the horizon.

The clouds moved in the pitch-dark sky.

The moon and stars peeked out.

Only a cold wind blew through them.

A winter wind blew across, as if raining down from the clear starry sky.

And it was faintly permeated with the aroma of incense permeated into the ground.

Right now, in front of our eyes, was an ending of one side.

Someone's life. Someone's conclusion. A tiny trace of someone once having lived in this world.

And – why was it, I wonder? I was standing right in the midst of countless graves, and yet, strangely enough, I felt no fear. All the people here, were dead. I was comfortable with death, and to die was to finally be at rest.

Eventually Yoishi slowly began to walk again, and I followed.

On both sides of the path were tall, overgrown weeds that had been untouched for many years – Suddenly, I saw many stones lined up in one direction.

"Ah…"

"It's the section for those who have no one to mourn their death."

Yoishi's whisper unintentionally startled me.

Right, those were certainly graves – or what used to be graves. Some of them had already toppled over. Some had already decayed to the point where the epitaph couldn't be deciphered. There were withered flowers in vases that had already broken down since who knows how long, and muddy cups of sake also lay scattered about.

“—Say, Yoishi.”

Trying my best not to look at the mass of graves with no one left to tend to them, I asked.

“Did you figure out that what happened in that house? Who was sending Shizue Namikawa’s paintings to the competition and for what purpose? And why was the sixth portrait in a place like that?”

“If you were to ask me who it was, there’s no answer other than Shizue Namikawa herself.”

“No…but Shizue Namikawa died seven years ago, right? That’s why it became a ghost story, right?”

“That’s not it.”

Yoishi declared without looking back.

“That was… future mail.”

“…Eh?”

“A system where you can post something to someone many years in the future. If you were aware of a system like that, you could send a mail to a competition after your death. The question is, why would Shizue Namikawa do that – and why did the sixth self-portrait originally not exist? There were only five self-portraits in the beginning, as had been originally appraised.”

“Wai--”

With a cold feeling as if something rubbed my neck, I asked.

“Wa-- wait a second. Didn’t we see it? There was definitely a sixth painting. It was hidden in some obscure place like the barn. It was so creepy that the people who found it got scared and disappeared--”

As I said the words out loud, a terrible premonition quickly began to grow inside me. The hill road we were walking on became markedly steeper.

Yoishi broke the branches that extended to her face, flung them at her feet and spoke:

“We proceeded to the back of that house from the entrance. We thought that the style of the paintings changed from the entrance as we moved from the entrance to the interior. But that wasn’t the case. Everything was in reverse; the barn was the entrance.”

“…The barn was the entrance?”

“I didn’t call that painting we found in the barn a portrait. I only called it the sixth one. And that was not even a canvas. When I looked at it closely, I understood – it was merely a window frame designed to fit the same frame as the other five self-portraits.”

“…No, wait a second… then, what? Are you saying that when I was there… I was only looking outside the window?”

“Yes. The only thing we saw outside that frame-like window was the scenery we see here now. And, if you saw something else besides this scenery--”

“Then that, was something not of this world.”

I suddenly felt something rear its head from one of the graves in my surroundings.

The sixth self-portrait—no, the window frame made to look like a canvas I had seen earlier, was drawn in my mind once more. The moment I recalled the hollow depths of those eyes, that gaze that pierced through my back – the air rang in my earlobes.

Just as my legs were about to wobble, the path abruptly ended.

It was – the main street that ran through the center of the cemetery.

We were thrown out on the paved road wide enough for large vehicles to pass each other. I saw a sidewalk lined with black cherry tree trunks.

Yoishi silently continued on that sidewalk. A little further away, I saw a tower that looked like a memorial monument. It seemed to be the center square of the cemetery, and we proceeded to it. Eventually, we reached a fountain without running water, and Yoishi sat down at a nearby bench.

From there, I looked back on the road we made our way from. I could barely make out the roof of that house beyond the dark copse we had just passed through. If you saw it from here, you could tell. That house was located on top of a hill, overlooking the cemetery.

“Why did Shizue Namikawa call that atelier ‘grave keeper’? It probably stemmed from her life.”

As Yoishi quietly began to narrate, I sat down beside her.

“She didn’t have single relative. She was married once, but death parted her from her husband. She lost the family she had finally gained. I don’t know where her husband is buried, but the possibility is high that he is here close to her home in the K cemetery. Although I heard that this cemetery was popular and booked several decades in advance. That means she might have waited for a vacancy in the community cemetery. No, Shizue Namikawa must have been waiting for a grave to open up day after day.”

“No… I mean, you’re just guessing, right…?”

When I asked her, Yoishi slowly turned to face me. Her face, illuminated by the moonlit night, was pure white, and her eyes were filled with emptiness. However, there was a definite sadness in them.

“She learned to draw by herself around that time – which proves everything. She continued to paint and wait day after day for a grave to become vacant. However, she finally realized. Having no relatives, if she were to die – she would not be able to protect her husband's grave, even if she got one. Even though they met through a fated encounter, they would end up sealed in tombs that no one would care

for. The tombs with no one to care for them should have been infinitely filled must have been nothing but emptiness for her.

Infinitely… filled---?

Thereupon, I finally realized.

“I see… you said it in the apartment. Some story about some hotel…”

“That’s right, Hilbert’s infinite hotel paradox – the thought experiment that there is an infinity greater than any infinity - applies precisely to this cemetery. Every day, someone dies. And they go to their graves. However, the land is finite, and the number of graves will one day be insufficient. When a grave has no left to care for it, it indeed becomes empty, but even if you stop thinking of the person in that grave, it doesn’t erase the existence of those within. They've been relegated to a realm beyond the reach of thought, but they definitely exist. And – perhaps, in her mind, graves with no relatives to tend to them were not infinite, but merely infinite because they were displaced.”

“Then… why did she use a future postal service to get her paintings in the competition?”

I tried to ask –

But somehow, I had already realized it. Even so, I wanted to hear Yoishi confirm it with her words. Yoishi gazed at me with a sad look, exhaled a white breath up into the night sky, and spoke the words.

“She allowed the dead to soar back into the world of the living as paintings.”

“……..”

“She lived as a grave keeper, and continues to be one even after death.”

Those words—

Endlessly echoed inside my ears.

“I don’t know whether Shizue Namikawa decided to protect the grave as a painter or became a painter to protect the grave. However, if she continued to send her paintings through the future postal service to competitions, whether or not they won prizes, the existence of the sender would be sure to be noticed. If a painting were to gain a bit of recognition, someone would one day visit her house. And her thinking probably was – that If there were many paintings left inside, then they might be kept for safekeeping somewhere. If they were kept by an appropriate organization, then as long as society existed, the safety of the paintings would be assured. And the longer it took for the paintings to be discovered and stored, the better. After all, the more pictures of the dead that are transcribed, the better. Because that’s the only way to return someone without any relatives back to this world. To gain time – that’s why she used the future postal service.”

No—that was madness.

It was a concept and action outside the bounds of common sense.

But—

I don’t know why, but now, here in the middle of this vast cemetery late at night, I understood her feelings painfully well.

Right, she was just doing what she had to do as a ‘grave keeper’.

“The idea of transcribing infinitely increasing number of dead on a limited canvas would indeed fail. However, we as humans are doing it, we bury an ever-increasing number of dead into limited graves and have yet to fail.”

“……..”

…I didn’t know. I had no idea. I never thought about it before. I had a vague idea that I would obviously be buried after I passed away – but, if I never got married, if all my relatives passed away, and in the instance of not having even a single friend who cared for me… my life might be labelled as one with no connection whatsoever.

I suddenly felt a fear different from that of ghosts, and let out a deep

breath.

And then looked up at the jet-black sky.

Tokyo's skyline had few stars in it, but—

In them, it felt like me and Yoishi were alone right now.

In the endless darkness that was ahead and behind, it felt like we walked together hand-in-hand.

"When I go to an art museum, I sometimes see a painting I can't help but be fascinated by."

"…Eh?"

I looked to my side, to see Yoishi swinging her legs back and forth, as she looked up at the monument.

"From time to time, it would make anyone halt in their tracks, and it's not a famous painting. The colors aren't gaudy, and the composition isn't extraordinary – but still, it's a completely fascinating painting. I thought it was because the feelings of the artist and my feelings matched… but could it be that the painting was not drawn by human hands?"

"…Hey, stop it."

In a large quiet art museum with no one around--

The image of Yoishi from behind, standing face to face with a single painting, drew itself in the back of my mind.

The painting, with the dead seared into it, merely stares at Yoishi, and Yoishi stares back at it with an entranced expression.

"But – even so, I'm still fascinated with the possibilities of the painting that can be created in such a way. A painting is a true representation of one's humanity on a canvas."

With those words—

What Yoishi was about to say inside the mansion finally sunk into me.

Buried flesh would one day return to dust. And Yoishi said that there should be a space left behind. I thought it was the job of the grave keeper to fill that space, but – that wasn't it. They were already there. No matter what the physical condition may be, the dead are still lying there, just not visible.

『The grave keeper is an existence that is the antithesis of a grave robber.』

Those words vividly came back to me.

And those grave robbers were—

All of us living humans, wasn't it?

Finally arriving at that answer, I sank down deep into the bench.

I looked up at the black sky, so wide and so black that I felt faint – and took a deep, deep breath. I realized how small the field of vision a human like me had in the face of a universe large enough to swallow me.

…That's right. The night skyline of Tokyo that looked to be painted black at first glance, actually had a lot of stars if you looked closely. They were always there, just not immediately visible. And the story of that something hotel was surely applicable to this universe as well. As long as the end of the universe could not be confirmed, its mass could be said to be infinite – and as long as there were stars that humans didn't know of, they too could be called infinite. That was the exact opposite of Schrodinger's cat, there could be infinite possibilities in this world; ghosts exist, as do UFOs, there might be ancient earthlings still dwelling on the surface of the moon, Nessie might exist on Loch Ness, Ogopogo in Okanagan lake, even father time, and even Hitogata[22] might be real – Ahhh, to sum it all up.

“Well… it might be good if there’s one painting drawn by a dead person in this world.”

Yoishi nodded in response.

“Of course, everything is my guess, but…but if such a painting were to exist – no, if it were to exist for me, then…”

As I looked at her from the side – Yoishi spoke with an innocent face, as if an evil spirit had been removed from her.

“For the first time in my sixteen-year life, I have a feeling I would find meaning in this endless corridor-like world.”

“…Corridor?”

Her words were the final piece of the puzzle.

…Ah, so that’s why… you were using the name ‘Lost child’?”[23]

The moment I asked her that—

“……”

“……”

After a long silence, Yoishi finally said, “Eh?” and she looked at me.

And in response I too said, “Ah,” as I realized.

…Damn it.

“W, why do you know that name…?”

“Ah, sorry. I didn’t mean to pry. Umm, I heard it from Sako – no, I asked him, um, in short…”

I answered Incoherently, but Yoishi turned bright red for some reason.

“T, that handle was a mistake. Before I’d realized, I ended up with

that handle, and started talking with it, and it would have been weird to change it after so long."

"Well, if it's a site like that, it's not a particularly weird handle or anything."

I consoled her for the time being, and then gently asked her.

As naturally as possible, trying my best not to sound reproachful.

"Say, Yoishi… Do you want to die?"

"…Eh?"

"I mean, that website – it's for people looking to commit suicide, right?"

In response, Yoishi stared at me unblinkingly and said, "That's not it," and shook her head.

"No? Then what were you doing there?"

When I asked her that, Yoishi put her finger on her chin for a while as if lost in thought – and spoke:

"You could say -- it was for persuasion."

"Persuasion? Who were you trying to persuade?"

"Someone who was already long dead, but didn't realize it."

"…Huh?"

After a while, when I understood the meaning of those words—

- Thump**Thump**Thump* I got goosebumps all at once.

"I found that site by accident. I was browsing it somewhat for a while, but there were posts on there that were obviously strange. A person who had left the words 'goodbye' a few weeks ago and disappeared began to talk about death again. Their expressions were somewhat distorted and inconsistent. At first, I thought it was another person pretending to be them -- but I suddenly realized. Ah,

this person already ended up killing themselves."

"H..Hey hey hey!"

"But it seemed the person in question hadn't realized it. They spoke of 'that world' with the same enthusiasm as always. That's why I tried to talk to them. And I was leading them to realize that they were already dead."

"…No, leading them? You…"

"That's right, I shouldn't have gotten involved. They kept gathering one after another. Most of the time, half of the replies I had were from the dead. As I thoroughly defeated their arguments, the gallery ended up getting bigger, and yet those in the gallery would have no idea of the fact that I was trying to drive the dead away, and the handle of 'lost child' I had intended to use as a throwaway ended up completely set in place…"

As I looked at Yoishi pouting with dissatisfaction—

I felt my insides churn. Unable to bear it, I ended up bursting into laughter. Uhahahahaha, with my mouth wide open, I roared with laughter in the cemetery at night.

--That's right. She was always like that. She would chase the paranormal, had her feet in the world beyond, peered into the abyss, and at the same time, she would help those who could be helped. If she met someone who was about to be swallowed by a world without hope, she would, in her own way, hold out a helping hand. Because she herself was a 'lost child'. A 'lost child' who wandered this endless corridor, a 'lost child' that knew the pain of continuing to search for something to believe in.

And—

She wasn't the type to use a handle name when talking seriously to someone.

She always spoke with her own name, even on the Internet.

And – Thereupon, I finally realized.

The reason Sako had told me about that site was… to inform me of Yoishi's state as a bulwark on the site? That she had strangely taken on the burden on a site where suicidal people had made the decision to die?

Was he trying to tell me she wasn't there because she wanted to die? And, that she herself was just a 'Lost child'?

"Damn it… that bastard, making things hard to understand!"

Yoishi cocked her head in puzzlement, when--

I suddenly heard a gut-wrenching thud echo through the night sky.

When I looked up, I saw that the night sky was dyed with multicolored fireworks, as they scattered in a brilliant display.

I looked at the watch to see it was exactly midnight. In short -- this moment – was the birthday of Jesus of Nazareth, Christmas had begun.

From there, the sound of fireworks went off one after another, *Bang* *Boom*. The sky in the direction of the station twinkled brightly, as if there was a countdown event going on somewhere. I heard boisterous cheers as well. And the fireworks that shot up to the sky in succession dyed the night sky in a colorful way, and scattered. It was a breathtakingly beautiful sight.

"…Ugh, I can't believe we're in a cemetery late at night on Christmas."

I muttered in disgust, but – well, I guess that was typical of us.

As I looked at the blazing petals spread out in the holy night – I thought I'd say 'Merry Christmas' for the time being, so I turned to face Yoishi besides me, however, I froze on the spot.

She was merely swinging her legs back and forth, as she stared up at the fireworks.

Her white, beautiful face, dyed in the light of the fireworks, still had the youthfulness of a sixteen-year-old. Her eyes under her long

eyelashes began to show a faint glint of will, and her straggling hair blowing in the wind caught her small nose rather than her large eyes, and she brushed it off with her pinky finger.

As I looked at her in fascination—

Yoishi suddenly turned around to face me, and tilted her head curiously.

That surprisingly cute gesture made my heart skip a beat.

At that moment, an unknown passion boiled up inside me. Oh shit, I thought to myself, as I laughed in order to brush it off, scrambled my hair, and after hesitating for a moment – reached out towards Yoishi.

I wrapped my hands around her soft cheeks.

And, as I looked directly at Yoishi who had a blank expression as she gazed at me –

I pinched the flesh of both cheeks and pulled them to the left and right.

So soft.

“Un…”

The corner of Yoishi’s mouth opened.

Her white teeth peeked out. It was an artificial thing, but it was definitely her smile.

“….pu”

“T...this is humiliating.”

“…Ah, emm, sorry. I just wanted to know what kind of face you’d make when you smiled.”

She brushed off my hand in response, and complained about something or other, but—

That kind smile that appeared for a moment made me feel like I was

rewarded for everything.

--Ah, that's it. The 'Yoishi Mitsurugi Rehabilitation Plan' was a long way off, and it might not be possible for me alone to see through the goal, but – despite that, she was still only sixteen. If it took her sixteen years to become like this, it would be fine if it took her another sixteen years to get back on track. Life still goes on. There was no need whatsoever to be impatient.

Illuminated by the light of the fireworks in the middle of the cemetery –

I put these thoughts in my hand as I gently patted Yoishi on the head.

Epilogue – Or, The Beginning of the Case that began everything

“I’ve thought about it a lot, I’ve thought about it over and over again.”

It was on a day near the end of the year. Before my last working day at the part-time job, I dropped by the Beatnik Research Society in the western club building, where Krishna-san, dressed in a bulky turtle neck sweater, caught me.

“I’ve thought about it an awful lot. I consulted with Takita-san about it, and then I thought some more, and after careful consideration, I came to the conclusion that it was the only way. But I was really troubled whether I should tell you about it or not.”

“Um, please calm down. What happened?”

“No, take a look at this. It would be faster if you saw it with your own eyes.”

Saying that, Krishna-san thrust her phone towards me.

Displayed on the LCD screen, was a message board from some website.

“Lost child…alliance? What is this site?”

“Yoishi’s fan club.”

“Huh?”

“I heard it from Takita-san. Yoishi was using the handle ‘lost child’ to post on some suicide website. And that she became the object of strange worship there.”

"…Ah. But she didn't do that in order to kill herself or anything--"

And, as I was about to continue explaining, "Never mind that, just look," said Krishna-san as she handed me the phone.

Having no choice, I took it and scanned over the website. It was a different site than the 'Heaven on earth' website from before, but it looked to be a message board with the same users on it. It was run by fanatical fans of 'Lost child' aka Yoishi Mitsurugi, and at present, there seemed to be a flurry of activity for some reason.

"There's like a ton of posts right now. Did something happen?"

"It's Yoishi's posts. Her fans are in pain because of her posts – or rather, she's become the target of a pitchfork mob."

"A target?"

"It's because of this – read these posts from the poster 'Lost child'."

In front of Krishna-san's small fingertip was--

Lost Child: 【I think this might be my last post.】

There was indeed a post like that from 'Lost child'.

I continued reading the following posts.

Lost Child: 【I might have found someone worthy of what's called trust.】

…Ah. So this is why they're mad…. It's not strange that they're mad. Yoishi – no, 'Lost child' had become the hope or the voice for those tired of this world, because she had ended up becoming the bulwark that barely stopped the suicide applicants from killing themselves. However, that was with the presumption that 'lost child' herself was infatuated with death, that she was their comrade – That 'lost child' herself was spouting words that conveyed a sense of hope was an unforgivable taboo in their eyes.

【You think that person is trustworthy?】【You're being fooled.】【Come back.】【Let's die together.】

Sure enough, such emotionally bare comments were posted one after another, but way down below, there was a denpa-like answer from the ‘lost child’.

Lost child:【It’s alright.】

Lost child:【If I’m betrayed, I’ll curse them.】

Lost child:【I’ll curse them until the next generation, and the generation after that.】

…Oi, she doesn’t mean me, does she?

An awful sweat appeared on my neck, I said ‘give me a break’ to myself, as I continued reading -- and I found lost child’s post under the rage filled posts of the mob.

Lost child:【However, that person probably won’t betray me to a fearsome degree.】

…….

Lost child:【Because they are a large box that could hold even the darkness of infinity.】

Lost child:【Because the box was far larger than I imagined.】

Lost child:【For a long time, I thought I had no one in this world.】

Lost child:【But now, I feel like I have some kind of connection.】

Lost child:【That’s why.】

Lost child:【That’s why, I will live.】

Those were the last words.

And that was Yoishi’s – no, Lost child’s farewell to that website.

“This…”

I looked away from the smartphone and towards Krishna-san once again, as the petite occult website manager nodded.

“Up until now, I kept telling you that Yoishi couldn’t be saved. That it was difficult for someone to return once they had been entranced by the darkness. I was worried that you too might end up becoming entranced by the other side. But you stubbornly kept at it. You never let go of Yoishi’s hand. You were resolved to rehabilitate her, and continued accompanying her to the countless paranormal things she could see. Even as your own mind relentlessly wore away.”

“…Krishna-san.”

“And this is the result. I believe she has indeed begun to change. And…”

“…And?”

Krishna-san raised up her red glasses, with her face was flushed redder than her glasses, she spoke with a look of extreme bitterness:

“Nagi-kun, isn’t this – love?”

“…Eh?”

“Hasn’t Yoishi Mitsurugi fallen in love with you?”

“…Eeeeeh?”

“In short, you know what I want to say to you, right?”

She spoke with a scary look on her face–

I gulped.

And, I thought a lot. I thought deep and hard, To the point where I had never even thought about an exam this deeply. About what had happened until now, about what would happen. The tiny things I could do, the tiny things I had to do – and, the things that couldn’t be done if it wasn’t me. I thought desperately, and thought some more,

and finally nodded. I stood up straight, and announced my answer to the petite occult site manager I respected.

“I shouldn’t be living with Yoishi anymore.”

“…”

“No – if I’m going to live with her, I have to do it properly.”

“Then you know what you have to do, right?”

Krishna-san nodded, and suddenly slapped my back.

“Go then.”

“Yes.”

I ran off immediately.

I slammed the door of the club room open, and almost rolled out into the corridor as I ran.

Yoishi, whose winter vacation had already started, said she was going to the city library today.

That’s why, if I were to go to the Musashino public library, which was a few minutes' bike ride from the university, I could meet her.

I don’t know what I should say to her when I see her. But that’s the way it goes. This wasn’t something you should think about before speaking. You just need to properly say the things you feel in the moment. You should only convey your feelings with full sincerity.

I pedaled the mama bike furiously; it made a noisy grating sound as the chain was rusty due to a lack of maintenance. I cycled past the back alley from the western club building, and hurled towards the public library.

--I wanted to meet Yoishi.

--I wanted to see her face, which seemed to bear all the sorrows of this world.

With that tantalizing feeling in my chest, I whizzed by on my bicycle.

I passed several fallen leaves from winter trees as bystanders looked at me in astonishment. Ah, now that I think about it, it's almost New Year's. I planned to return home on New Year's, but come to think of it, what was Yoishi going to do? Was she going to stay alone in the apartment? What is the real situation with her parents' house? If her parents are still alive and well, and if they found out that their precious daughter was staying in the apartment of a stranger – moreover, in the loft of the apartment of a strange university student, how would they feel? If it was my father, he would, without doubt, smack the living daylights out of both his daughter and the guy.

I shook my head after thinking that far.

It would be better if I asked her directly.

If, on New Year's, she didn't have a place to go to, I'd ask her if she would come to Fujieda.

After thinking about it long and hard, she came to Fujieda in my dreams, but not in reality. She had met my sister, but not my father. And neither did she meet my mother who slept in her grave. That's right, I wanted her to meet the real Peko-chan, Maru-yan and Ranbashi. I wanted her to meet all the wicked friends in my hometown.

--That's why, I will live.

I recalled Yoishi's post, her words made my chest burst with happiness; they made me want to scream out loud.

I grinned suspiciously as I continued pedaling, and before long, I saw the light brown brickwork of the city library building. I impatiently parked my mama bike in the bike parking, and ran to the entrance – Where I saw that prominent figure come out of the automatic door.

In a black Koumei school uniform, her long black hair danced in the

wind. She was wearing a black coat on top of it today. It was the same coat she wore on the day we first met in the family restaurant.

“Heeeey, Yoishi!”

I shouted.

Wearing a somewhat lonely expression, Yoishi Mitsurugi looked my way.

When she caught sight of me, was it my imagination, or did I see a look in her eyes that suggested the lost child had found her family?

I vigorously waved my hand at her.

Then, I hurriedly closed the distance between me and Yoishi, who was looking at me.

But—

At that moment, Yoishi’s eyes wavered.

It seemed as if they had found something behind me, and widened.

I also ended up unconsciously looking behind.

It was Itsukaichi-kaido Avenue. And beyond that – one lane away on the road, I saw a familiar little figure.

Long and pretty pony-tails. The innocent type. Large eyes like that of a doll – It was the ghost photograph selling elementary school student, Akane Nanamori. She wore the same red school bag as that day, with her slender legs sticking out of her short, elegant skirt, as she walked straight towards us. Her cute facial features were the same, but—the Akane of today looked hollow, as if she had been stripped of all life.

“Ah…”

And I realized.

The road she was walking on wasn’t the pedestrian crossing.

Akane was walking on the roadway for some reason.

“…That idiot.”

At the same time, I saw it. On the crossing, a two-ton truck speeding into the intersection just as the traffic light was about to change.

Suddenly, I recalled how Akane had urged me to play the word-association game by twirling her fingers that day in the park. I recalled the innocent expression she showed me for an instant. I recalled those sad eyes that talked about causing problems for her mother.

I moved in an instant. At that moment, moving Akane’s body away from there was perhaps the only thought in my mind. I threw my backpack away right there, and ran onto the road as fast as I could.

--For an instant, I thought I saw something black hanging behind Akane—

Was it because I recalled the ‘Curse god’ Yoishi had talked about?

The truck driver’s eyes as they widened in surprise.

The bystanders with their hands covering their mouth.

A flock of chirping sparrows perched on a power line.

The trail of clouds fluttering high in the sky — and the hazy afternoon moon far above.

I felt like I saw a lot of things.

However, I don’t remember anything anymore.

Someone’s scream reached my ears – and with tremendous force, heaven and earth turned upside down.

『Raven Notes』 -- 「The Raven's Memorandum」 or 「The story that gets devoured」 「Part One」

The writing that begins here is, to put it simply, a memorandum.

I mean, don't you feel better when you write down things that you don't get? In short, it is a memo, or what is commonly referred to as a memorandum, written down to organize things that are not clear to me no matter how much I think about them.

So, if you're reading this text now because you felt suspicion over my death, it is probably futile. Even if you keep reading, you won't get any logical explanation for my "death". In that sense, this writing may have the connotation of a "will," but obviously as I currently write this, I am not dead. I have no intention to die whatsoever -- I'm living so blissfully that I was window-shopping for cute summer clothes just now, and licking my lips at a baked custard in Ginza's Bischero, and I can't suppress my excitement over the offline meeting tonight. Then why am I writing this, you might ask? I have no way to describe it other than calling it sixth sense. I have no intention of dying at all, but I strongly feel the presence of death close at hand – that's the only way I can explain it.

"Ahh, I see, Karasu-san -- you're a fortune-teller. Did you see your own death?"

Some people may ask me that, but that's not quite right. Generally, fortune-telling is a combination of cold reading, which is "a series of bluffs," and hot reading, which is "the fruit of preliminary research." It's an occult style therapy combining those two with a little bit of

conversational skills and presentation. And you know, forget my death, I can't even see if or when I'd marry -- well, yeah, about that. That marriage thing. That's the start of this memorandum.

You know, I feel like there is a limit to how long I can continue to sell myself as a young, beautiful lady. I mean, I do want to marry. Of course, I'm no longer naive to think that some handsome guy on a white horse will suddenly show up one day, but I still long for a chance encounter, to the extent that sometimes I want to shout, "God, when are you preparing my happiness?" And -- it's embarrassing to admit, but a short while ago, I decided to sign up for one of those, what you would call, dating sites. Well, they did say that the first month was free, so I figured I'd give it a try. But then after I typed in my info during sign-up, and looked at the section where I was supposed to input my desired preferences for a partner, my fingers froze. Desired height? Desired education? Desired income? Huh? What? That sort of stuff wasn't what I wanted! Do you really think you can win me over with your salad-flavored appeals? Aren't there more, you know, values relevant to your core as a person? Like trying to become the king of pirates, or trying to master hamon, or preparing to move to Mars. And of course, that wouldn't just be talk, but the type of guy who has a twinkle in his eyes as he says that and seems to be working for it pragmatically. I don't get excited unless you're someone like that! I don't think it'd be fun being with you otherwise! So, I tore out my hair and got frustrated. I got discouraged to even look for a partner. My whole world had already turned completely dark –

But, that happened.

【Yo, hello! I'm the handsome guy you were looking for!】

「.....」

【My dream is world domination. My favorite delicacy is the despair of humans. Sometimes people shout, "You devil!" at me though, hahahah.】

「.....」

【Huh? Hello, hello? Is this showing up properly?】

Of course, this was not a vocal conversation, but rather a conversation through text chat – that's how I remember it, but as I tediously narrated at the start, this is from memory, just a memo, a memorandum. Just a list of my subjective memories. In other words, as I fell prostrate despairing over dating sites, I had begun chatting with someone on the other side of the Internet who called themselves a devil.

【Huhhhh, you're Mr. Devil? Are you actually handsome?】

I replied dubiously by typing into my keyboard, and in reply:

【Of course, of course! When I was a kid, I was praised like a jewel, and in paradise, I was celebrated as a being that gives people true freedom and lifts them up to the realm of light.】

【Then might you be the rumored Prince of Hell, he who was originally "bathed in light"?】

【No no no-, well, as far as I can tell you, right, in terms of appearance, imagine a white face, blond hair, and golden wings, and that's exactly it!】

【Not a bald old man trying to declare himself beautiful?】

【Ow ow ow ow-- As if!】

...I felt like I was destined to be connected to pain. This one felt more like a Mephistopheles than a Lucifer, but I had free time until work. It'd been a while since I chatted with someone, so I continued the conversation, figuring that if he turned out to be really annoying, I could just shut him off in the middle of the conversation.

【So, what business does Mr. Devil have with me?】

【Well, I guess you could say that I came to take back something that

was forgotten. You forgot to give me something that you were supposed to give me before and disappeared. I had a hard time finding you!】

【Hmm, so that means that I've met Mr. Old Man before?】

【I'm not an old man! I'm quite handsome, thank you! Please drop that image of a bald man from your head!】

【You know, I'd like to at least have an image of Lord Lucifer from The Very Rich Hours of the Duke of Berry, but my computer only has images collected from Kodansha's published Demon book collection. [24]】

【Wa... wait, isn't he's bald in that?!】

【You know it well... So -- what was it? Did I meet you somewhere? What was I meant to give you, my soul? When did I make a contract with you?】

【Ahh, that's the thing, it's so troublesome. Where in the world did this theory of the devil wanting souls come from? It makes me sad. I've never wanted such a thing.】

As I continued chatting, I examined the URL of the site I was connected to. It was a site I'd never heard of. And from my browsing history, it seemed I'd jumped there from the dating site -- did I click on some weird banner?

【Well then, I'll give you a hint.】

Suddenly, the old devil man spoke conceitedly.

【It was when you were still a blossoming high school girl.】

【Eh?】

【Wasn't there a bizarre rumor that spread around class? About the "Man dressed in blue".】

--Ahh, I vaguely remember. It was something like, if you ended up answering "three questions" posed by a man dressed completely in blue, you would soon die or something like that. As I recall, that kind of story was making the rounds in class.

【Yes, yes that one. I'm the "Man dressed in blue!"】

.....

【.....Hello?】

【Yes, yes.】

【You remember, don't you? And if I remember correctly, I believe I asked you "three questions" too, but you managed to get away quite cunningly! It vexed me so much you see-- that I've been looking for you this whole time!】

【Ahh, I'm starting to vaguely remember that too.】

The scene from that day vaguely reawakened in my brain. It came with a bitter emotion, but I couldn't remember why that was. Or... wait? If it was just as he said, then...

【Did you -- have something to do with Haruka-chan's death?】

The man ceased responding after I wrote my message.

Suddenly, something bitter began to swell up from the bottom of my stomach. It was unpleasant, as if a forgotten nightmare from long ago had rapidly begun to infest the real world. And yet despite that -- as if I were tearing away the scab of a wound that was still healing, as if guided by an unseen hand, I ended up asking the question.

【And my mother, and my boyfriend at the time, their deaths too?】

【You say such scandalous things.】

--The old man eventually began to write after some time.

【All I did was ask questions, so I have no reason to be blamed by anyone for it. If you don't want to answer, you don't have to answer, after all.】

【That was part of the horror story about the "Man dressed in blue," wasn't it? But -- what truly made that ghost story terrifying was the words that came afterwards. "You shouldn't have to answer, but the moment you are asked, everyone is forced to answer."】

【Pretty much. That's true, but you got away. I could never forget that, and I couldn't allow it, so that's what I'm here today to talk to you about. Because you see, if that method were to end up spreading, it would kind of affect my raison d'etre.】

The man wrote that message, but -- strange. I couldn't remember, at all.

Indeed, I vaguely remembered the urban legend or ghost stories about the "Man dressed in blue" making the rounds during high school. But until I was told just now, I didn't remember the connection between that and someone else's death -- that is, the deaths of Haruka-chan, my mother, and my boyfriend. Why? How did the three of them die? Why do I not remember that correctly? Even though something grave happened, it was as if the map of that memory was shredded, as if it had been bitten and chewed off by something.

As I glared at the laptop monitor, I bit my nails and desperately tried to remember.

That's right... I did meet the "Man dressed in blue". I also felt like I'd been asked "three questions." And when I found out what the questions were, it was as if I was on the verge of despair – but, the moment I thought back that far, an awful chill swept over me that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand up on end.

This was bad. I felt like I shouldn't be remembering any further, so I used the keyboard to try and close the chat -- but it wouldn't let me log out. I tried closing the browser, but it wouldn't close no matter

what.

【It's futile. I've already reached you.】

Those dancing letters appeared once more.

【Whether you close this computer, or destroy it, the next time you connect to the internet, I can appear at your side once more. Think of it as having bookmarked you. So, how did you escape from me? What did you do back then? Will you remember that for me?】

【But hey, I can't remember it so there's no helping it.】

【Can't remember, can't remember! That's exactly it, humans have that function, and that's why I hate you all. You live relying on an unreliable system called memories, yet you forget everything you don't fancy. Or you let your ego be established by overwriting it with incorrect information. That's a problem for me. You know, there are things like bugs, right? It means that God who is said to have made this world is not as omnipotent as he is claimed to be. There are always unintended consequences of unintended actions. That's what you once did, and I must eradicate it. If that were to spread, then this world would be filled with chaos--】

Thereupon, I closed the laptop itself with a snap.

I stood up without pause, went to the kitchen, took out a Menthol cigarette, and lit it. I turned on the ventilation fan, smoked one slowly for the time being, and returned to my desk after a pause. Then I opened my laptop once again, and--

【How rude, how rude! I was still talking, and you go and do that all of a sudden!】

He was still there, so I closed it again with a snap.

It seemed like we were still connected after all. I didn't know whether he really was a devil, or a new type of computer virus, but either way, my laptop had definitely been taken hostage.

"God. My customer data and everything is in this laptop, too."

When was the last time I backed up the data? Ahh, it was about half a year ago -- or even worse, maybe a year ago. I folded my arms. They do say your irresponsible attitude can come back to haunt you at times like these. In any case, I still couldn't throw away my laptop, and having him appear every time I connected to the internet was problematic. I sat back in my chair and opened my computer, reminding myself that it was important to take a firm line with stalkers.

【So, what do I need to do?】

【You just need to remember, what you forgot to give me. And how you were able to escape from me back then, the method.】

【But, I'll die when I remember it, right? Isn't that ending too sad for me after having gone through all that trouble to remember it?】

【Sad? I'm the one who's sad! How much effort do you think it took to find you?!】

Ahh, what a pain, or so I thought, but I had no real choice except to remember as this guy said. For better or for worse, I could talk to the embodiment of this computer glitch, and if I talked to him and convinced him to leave, it would be fixed somehow. An exorcist I was acquainted with said something like that. They said that exorcism was, in essence, persuasion. Besides, I had escaped from him once before, so there was no reason why I couldn't do it a second time -- at least, by logic.

And so, I crossed my legs in front of the laptop, and closed my eyes to remember what happened back then.

○

Haruka-chan – as I recall, her real name was Haruka Toonoki.

Haruka-chan was at any rate, a good girl. The kind of kid who's in every classroom, whose presence is enough to light up the whole class, popular with both the guys and the girls. She had bright, fluffy hair, and when she laughed, a cute dimple appeared – ahh, she was the type that warmed your heart, the type who must have been brought up with tons of love since birth.

But – in my mind, the last image of Haruka-chan was that without a head.

One day, she jumped off the school roof and her head split open from the neck up. She died with a part of her bright hair still stuck to her head, and a scattering of reddish-black pieces of flesh which I could no longer distinguish. It was brushed off as a suicide, but -- if I remember correctly, the rumor about the "Man dressed in blue" began to circulate in class a while after Haruka-chan passed away.

From what I heard, Haruka-chan had been troubled by the "Man dressed in blue" that kept showing up in her dreams shortly before her death. It was rumored that the man dressed in blue had asked her "three questions" in her dream, and that Haruka was taken to the other world because she had answered them.

Well, it was a common urban legend, a ghost story that you often heard from high school students in the middle of puberty. At the time I was the type of kid who had a slanted view of the world, and if pushed to say, I didn't believe in it at all. Of course, I was heavily affected by Haruka-chan's death, but I probably smirked and laughed at my classmates, who cowered in fear of that rumor, saying that if answering the question would kill you, you simply didn't need to answer.

●

And, having remembered that far back -- I felt myself being covered by a terribly cold chill. My palms were dripping with sweat.

【Continue.】

I looked at the LCD screen of my computer and saw that short message. I clicked my tongue once, exhaled slowly, and continued remembering.

●

Around half a year after that--

Right, on that day, I caught sight of my mother downtown. It was an afternoon so hot just standing still was enough to make you sweat; I left school early and was in front of the train station – when I noticed my mother walking alone beyond the crowd of laughing, buzzing people. At the time, I had a bad relationship with my mother and was about to leave without calling out to her, but then I noticed. I noticed a person in a strange outfit walking right behind her.

He was dressed from head to toe in a bright blue suit. His shirt, necktie, shoes and hat were all blue, and the moment I thought, ‘Wow, he has a terrible fashion sense!’, I felt a chill crawl down my spine together with a feeling of surprise. Come to think of it, wouldn't that be what a "Man dressed in blue" would look like? The man gradually crept closer to my mother from behind, before eventually calling out to her in front of a burger shop. My mother was surprised when she turned around, but answered the question with a word or two of some sort. I couldn’t help but feel a terrible premonition, and started running. However, the crowd was even bigger than usual that day, making it hard to get close to them, and by the time I finally made it through, the man in the blue dress was gone. My mother simply stood dumbfounded as the rising heat haze warped the scene. I asked, "Who was that?", but she only gave me a vague smile.

Again. This person never told me the things that were important. I felt like a brat - well, I was a brat, really, but my spoiled thoughts swept over, and I felt like an idiot for worrying about her, so I just left her there and walked away.

Yes -- the thought that this would be my last conversation with her never crossed my mind.

My mother hung herself shortly afterwards.

While I was at high school, she tied a curtain to the handrails of the second-floor stairs, and because she was dangling from there, I was the first to discover her when I came home from school and opened the front door. There was no hint of foul play, and a simple suicide note was found, so it was brushed off as a simple suicide – We weren't a family that spoke much. It ended with neither my father nor my brother knowing what troubled mother. But I alone attended the funeral with a choking feeling in my heart.

--Was it really suicide? The man dressed in blue said something to mother. Was it the so-called "three questions"? And what were the questions? Did Haruka-chan and my mother die because they ended up answering the questions? What the hell was that "Man dressed in blue" anyway?

My thoughts continued to swirl round and round as I continued to think about it--

Around that time, I finally began communicating with the girls who were close to Haruka-chan.

"Hey, what did that “Man dressed in blue” ask Haruka-chan? What were the 'three questions'?"

I asked around, but no one wanted to talk about it, and I couldn't get them to tell me anything. It seemed that the story of the "Man dressed in blue" became a topic that no one in class wanted to touch. To speak about it meant that you would become involved in it. The pale expressions on the faces of my classmates who said that resembled that of the dead to me.

--Perhaps the "Man dressed in blue" was another form of the "Grim reaper".

With this idea in mind, I began to look through books on my own. I

went to libraries here and there to research myths and legends related to "Grim reapers," and searched all over the web for "Man dressed in blue" and "Three questions/death." However, no such existed anywhere. There were similar ghost stories, but they all seemed like urban legends that were cobbled together using a slew of horror stories.

At a loss, I decided to create a thread on the forum of an occult site I frequented.

【Three questions -- The "Man dressed in blue" thread】

It was a shady-looking title, but I thought I might be able to obtain some information. However, it only got spammed by trolls, and I was unable to obtain any information whatsoever connected to the "Man dressed in blue".

Without knowing anything, another six months or so had passed--

I was merely living my life burdened with something depressing, when I got a boyfriend.

He was a university student I met at my part-time job, and he confessed to me, but I turned him down at first. I couldn't shake the feeling that nothing had been resolved, and I was also afraid that he might get involved. However, he remained kind, bright and energetic-- and in retrospect it was obvious, but our conversations never touched upon the word "death". Basically, he was the person who reminded me of a normal everyday life, something I had almost forgotten. I slowly opened up to him, and eventually began going out with him. Those were warm days that made me tear up for no reason, days I hadn't experienced in quite some time, but--

Yes, I shouldn't have dated him after all.

One weekday afternoon -- I saw a dream. If I remember correctly, it was right in the middle of midterms, when I was home early afternoon, but didn’t feel like studying, so I lay down in bed and ended up falling asleep. In my dream, the "man dressed in blue" I saw

that day was slowly walking.

My heart thudded, and I stopped in my tracks in my dream.

I didn't want to have anything to do with him anymore. That was my honest feeling, I think. Having my life tossed about by such a vague existence was wrong. That's what I thought. I would just wait for the man in blue clothing to pass by, and just as I'd crouched to hide behind something -- my heart froze and thudded once more.

The man in blue clothing was following someone. And I realized that it was my boyfriend.

-- W...wait, what? That person has nothing to do with this, right!?

I screamed a soundless scream, and before I realized, I had set off on a run trying to catch up with them. But my legs moved slowly, as if glued to the ground, and like that day, a wall of people stood in my way. In between the people, I saw that the "Man dressed in blue" had begun speaking to my boyfriend. My boyfriend stopped in his tracks and turned around, with the expected surprised expression.

--Don't do it. Don't answer him.

I cried and screamed, and I finally realized. The boyfriend I began going out with to fill my loneliness and sorrow. The bittersweet relationship I began to build as if to escape into a warmth. But even so, I was saved from the point where the threads of my spirit had worn down slender and thin, and thanks to him, I realized that the world was still filled with color.

"If you've got a problem with me, say it to me!"

I screamed as I finally caught up with the two of them, and grabbed the sleeve of the man in blue clothing.

And – in that moment.

For the first time, I heard the voice of the man in blue clothing.

That low voice, one that I had heard somewhere, was asking my boyfriend.

"□□□□□□?" "□□□□□□?" "□□□□□□?"

--"Three questions."

--Those questions, that if answered, would result in death.

I was supposed to have finally heard them -- but my consciousness was forcibly ripped away, and I awoke from my dream.

I was on the bed in my room. The sun was still high in the sky, its light pouring into my room. I hadn't changed out of my school uniform, and was lying on my side there alone in tears. The emotional remnants from the dream still lingered, and my heart continued to race. Regardless of whether my consciousness was hazy or not, I immediately got up, and called my boyfriend's cellphone.

However, he didn't pick up. The ringtone sounded fifteen times, and I cut off the call when it switched to voice mail. No, he might still be in a lecture at university. He might have been on the move. I told myself that, but I recalled what happened with Haruka-chan, with my mother, and the freezing anxiety suffocated me. As if to escape, I faced my desk and pulled out the tarot cards from the drawer. It was a set I'd bought out of interest while I was researching the grim reaper. I had learned how to use them at that time.

I calmed my breathing, and placed the Tarot cards on the desk in Major Arcana form. As I thought hard about him, I asked the Tarot. However, his near future -- the card that appeared left me aghast. I shuffled the Tarot again, and this time placed them in Minor Arcana form. And, once more, I knocked away the result with my hand, and tried changing the spread to the Celtic Cross, the Hermit's Lamp, and the Carterhoff[25]. But the result was always the same. I flew out of my room.

Tarot is merely for your peace of mind.

You can put any sort of meaning to the cards, and they exist as a substitute simply to comfort people’s anxious hearts. I tried to think

that, but on the other hand, I couldn't help but calculate the odds of five straight Tarot readings turning up the same result. 22 cards in the Major Arcana, 56 in the Minor Arcana. In other words -- the first two alone meant a 1/1232 probability. Did -- did that not mean that something was set in stone?

My boyfriend's university was in the neighboring town, and as I awaited the bus, I looked for the first time in a long time at the occult site where I once posted the 【"Man dressed in blue" thread】 to escape my anxiety. Other than the meaningless spam, there were countless ads for adult sites posted, and--

Far down from them, I found it.

【I saw the blue-clothed man.】

I stopped breathing when I saw those six words.

When I looked at the time of the post, I saw that it had been made just five minutes prior.

●

【--Oh?】

When I remembered back that far, the old devil man wrote.

【The person posting on the forum knew about me?】

【I... I think so.】

【Interesting. Do continue.】

●

...Umm, you suddenly interrupted, I forgot where I was.

Oh right, I replied in the thread right away, thinking they might still

be there.

【Where? Where did you see him? Who are you?】

While awaiting the bus, I refreshed the page over and over again, waiting for a reply. Eventually, the bus arrived, and I jumped in. When I sat down, I replied once more, unable to wait any longer.

【In my case, he appeared in my dream. I also saw him in reality. In both cases, he was speaking to someone I knew. And those people I knew died. What is that? Who is that man?】

I wrote that, and held my cellphone in my hands, as if praying to it.

It felt like an eternity passed before I got a response, but it probably hadn't even been a minute. Eventually, that someone replied.

【Did they end up answering his questions?】

My heart thudded, and before I could think of how to answer, the next post appeared.

【Then I'm sorry, but I don't think that person can be saved.】

I wrote.

【Do you know the content of those questions?】

【I know.】

【Tell me. What are those questions? Is there a way of being saved after being asked?】

【There is, but I can't really recommend it.】

【It's still better than dying! Tell me!】

And then--

That inexplicable post appeared.

【Hey, are you scared?】

.....Huh?

【Are you scared, right now?】

【How does it feel to be scared?】

I felt horrified by those words posted in succession.

--What's with this guy?

Of course I'm scared! Are you stupid? Or, what? Was this person a denpa that scattered occult fantasies everywhere? I mean, I can't speak for others at all, but it was the kind of guy who posted on a message board like this in the middle of the day, so it might be some weirdo who was too obsessed with the occult -- and just as I was pondering whether or not it was worth continuing, those words appeared.

【I need to go now.】

--What? Go?

【I need to do my homework.】

.....H-homework? Then -- what? Was this an elementary school kid? Was I being teased by an elementary school kid? No -- no, at this

point, it didn’t matter who they were, even if it was an elementary school kid. Even if it was an urban legend, if there was an answer, I wanted to know. Two people close to me who were involved with the "Man dressed in blue" were already dead. Regardless of whether the one replying was an elementary school student, this was the only rope dangling down to hell. In this dark world, where I couldn't even make out my own feet, it was the only rope that came down to me in this world of endless darkness. If they got offended and ended up disappearing into the internet, then it would truly be over--

--With that thought, I operated my cell phone as my fingers trembled, and responded.

【I'm scared.】【I'm really scared.】

Holding back the tears that welled up, I continued to post on the message board.

【So, please. Tell me what's asked, and how to reply in order to be saved.】

Then--

The answer came from the other side of the internet.

【The blue-clothed man first asks, 『What is my name?』】

--Name?

【The next question is, 『What is the name of my child?』】

--Child? Why? That blue-clothed man was the type to have a child?

【And then at the end, this is the trick, the blue-clothed man will ask

what's in the box. Don't fall for it.】

....Trick? Box? Don't fall for it? -- I didn’t get it at all. I didn’t get it at all, but alright. Understood. I was just about to accidentally miss my stop, so I hurriedly shouted and mashed the stopping bell, and jumped off. And then as I ran toward the university, I called my boyfriend's phone again. After several rings, I heard that familiar voice, "Hello," and at that moment, I burst into tears.

".....Ahhh, you're alive! Thank God!"

《What're you on about?》

"Never mind, it's nothing. Please, listen carefully. If you love me, you must remember what I'm going to say. Even if it's in your dreams, remember it."

《Hey, hey, calm down.》

“Just listen! If someone you don't know asks, 『What's my name?』, don't say anyone's name. If they ask, 『What's my child's name?』 don't say the name of anyone you know. And--"

《How did you know?》

My heart beat painfully at his words.

《I mean, the dream I saw. I dozed off during class a while ago. I was asked in my dream, by a guy in blue clothing. He asked me what his name was.》

"What -- what did you answer?"

《What, my name, Kimihiko Iida.》

"W- why? Why would you tell a stranger your name?"

《It wasn't a stranger.》

.....What?

《Because, the guy in blue clothing behind me was--》

The moment the rest of those words reached me -- there was a tremendous sound on the other end of the phone.

Someone's scream rang out, and a rattling metallic sound rang out simultaneously. The sound of something pouring to the ground continued without pause, and I could hear countless screams from the other end of the receiver.

I kept holding the cell phone to my ear.....

As my body weighed down, hardened, and froze.

I could do nothing, I could not resist... the deep, dark, swamp.

All that was there -- was an inescapable despair.

Afterword

Contests.

I've wondered why people are eager to take part in contests, but I think that in the end, don't they do it because they want to protect their identity? People resolve themselves to compete when confronted with others who do not share their values, when that other person rudely intrudes in their domain. At times, that is done through violence, through exchange of arguments built on logic, and through acts classified through a certain set of defined rules in sports, but that has some element of excitement for the spectators. It is then sublimated into entertainment and highly commercialized, leaving not a fragment of the pure individual resolve made at the beginning to engage in a contest.

Why I first began to think on this is because I was weak at contests for a long time. I wasn't a fan of lumping people into winners and losers. In that context, I was under the impression that the medium of 'novels' was almost limitless in its diversity, and similarly, that the feelings of each person who reads them is dependent on the reader, and that there's no ranking of first place, second place – But, in today's society, novels too, are subject to relative value, be it the month's best sellers, Amazon sales rankings, or simply and purely in the number of copies in circulation, things one can't always control.

Of course, there are writers in this world who have the motivation to become bestselling authors, and it's not my intention at all to disparage them, even so, when they wrote the first word of their first novel, the person they had to fight was something hazy inside themselves. When they conquered the battle in that inner blaze of conflict, a novel materializes, which is then evaluated by society, becomes their day job, and somehow, before they know it, it becomes not a battle with oneself, but instead becomes a battle with someone else – no, I thought that would be fine if that were the case, but…I

don't know. However, in the end, things that are exposed to time and countless critics are the real deal. The tiny battle that is only for oneself may eventually grow to the entire world that involves others, and to the grand battle that transcends even time, or at least, those are the self-conscious immature thoughts I have.

And -- thinking that far.

I realized, Ah, so that's it. In short, the reason the people want to compete, is to move forward, even if only a little, and it might be an instinct to confirm that they have moved forward. Not to protect their own identity, or to knock down others, or even to classify them into winners and losers – it may just be a ritual to confirm that you were born into this world and that you are indeed headed somewhere.

Well, the world is so full of uncertainties that even such a wild thought exercise is only applicable to me personally, but at any rate, the world may be interesting because it is full of uncertainties, and I would like to become a mature person who can enjoy it with a sense of freedom.

Well then, the Phenomeno series is entering the second part of the overall story from this volume.

Yoishi, Nagito, Krishna, Sako, Takamura – we ventured into the stage where the main characters have all become part of one larger flow after having walked their separate paths, and even as I exaggerate so, in the end, it's a small fragment in an even larger world, but from the perspective of those who live there, it's the one and only thing, and I too, want to quieten my heart and follow them.

Please allow me to write a word of thanks here.

Yoshitoshi Abe-san produced wonderful illustrations this time as well. I don't know how to thank him for the cover, a profound expression of Yoishi that is enough to suck out the soul, but I'm also extremely glad to see Sako Takita in visual form. Thank you so much!

The director in charge, Katsushi Oota-san, the assistant director Moegi Hirabayashi-san. Thank you for assisting me with a smile and never scowling, even when I was rewriting so much.

And lastly, to all those who have read this far.

I believe it is a type of fate that we meet here, I will treasure it like a precious stone, and try not to betray it even if it is vague and will be diligent from here on as well.

Even if my fight against myself is a victory 51 times and a failure 49 times…I desire to show you my self that will crawl forward.

October 2013

Ninomae Hajime

Afterword To the Afterword

I started "Phenomeno" as a project that would allow me to write many of my favorite ghost stories! However, I had always thought that a ghost story was a "short story" and that "the sharpness of the last line" was what made me realize that I could not write a book just by collecting short stories. I realized after I started writing that simply collecting short stories does not make a book.

Even though there’s a limit to how inexperienced you could be, I realized later that it was necessary to not only have an ending, but proper development all the way through for a volume. From there, I spent many days in a constant struggle, wondering why I had started such a project, and sometimes becoming desperate, believing that there was no such thing as ghosts. Then on a certain day, I saw it for the first time since I was born. That’s right, a ghost.

There's a river that runs alongside my house, And as I was cycling along the river late at night, I saw the shadow of person ahead of me, illuminated by the dim light. The shadow came up from the river even though it was late at night, and when it noticed me, it seemed startled, and I could see that it was dismayed, as if it was thinking of going back to the river. What is with that guy? As I quickly drew close, the shadow darted off to the other side of the river. I realized it when I reached the place that shadow had been, in the direction it ran off to, was a cemetery, and the shadow was nowhere to be seen.

It was then that I realized something. The shadow only had the *lower half* of its body all along. I shuddered at not realizing the unnaturalness at all. However, when I think back on it now, I don't think it was very scary. That might have been due to that ghost’s panicked state. Assuming that it really was a ghost—then having a ghost panic, that fresh surprise must have evoked a sense of camaraderie.

At any rate, everyone. It seems that ghosts get surprised too.

Now then, please allow me to write a word of thanks here.

This volume received endorsement from Masaki Tsuji-sensei. As you all know, Masaki Tsuji-sensei has written countless masterpieces of fiction, and he has written countless screenplay masterpieces. He is a living legend in the world of creative works. The soul of that massive creative energy(to be honest, I even thought it was a pen name shared by several authors up to a point), has on this occasion, despite being very busy, read through the six volumes of 'Phenomeno', and given me his impressions full of warmth and humor. I'm the person that gets teary eyed when I recall the final episode of 'Giant Gorg', and this time as well, I was moved to tears. I'd like to express my deepest thanks. Thank you very much.

February 2016

Ninomae Hajime

Translator's Notes and References

1. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsume_shogi
2. ↑ Ikkaigabuchi, the name of the website, or in other words: abyss of the world beyond
3. ↑ Here's a visual reference for the paper with a red Torii gate drawn on it. https://www.scaryforkids.com/pics/kokkuri-san-02.jpg
4. ↑ Tatari-gami. https://yokai.com/tatarigami/
5. ↑ https://www.discoverkyoto.com/event-calendar/october/doll-memorial-service-hokyoji-temple/
6. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shimenawa
7. ↑ https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/87/Kitagawa_Utamaro_-_Takashima_Ohisa_Using_Two_Mirrors_to_Observe_Her_Coiffure_Night_o_MFA_Boston_21.6410.jpg
8. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ikiry%C5%8D
9. ↑ So here, we have one of the interesting kanji puns that are not easy to translate. The syllables 'Shō' and 'ko' in 'Shōko-chan' are written in Katakana as ショウコちゃん throughout the case, but here, they are written in kanji forms as 正子ちゃん(Shōko-chan) and 憧子ちゃん(Shōko-chan). The kanji for 子(ko) means child, and the other kanji before ko are proper (正) Shō', and yearned(憧) Shō', so proper child and child yearned for.
10. ↑ Continuing from the previous explanation, the kanji used here is 障, which has a meaning of hurt or harm, so harmful child. Interestingly the two kanjis here can also be read as Shōji(障子), which means paper sliding door, and which, if you can recall, first closed behind Nagito and Yoishi in the Iizuka household.
11. ↑ Continuing on from the previous kanji puns, Yoishi now uses 焼子ちゃん, with the kanji 焼 meaning to burn, and 笑子ちゃん, with the kanji 笑 meaning to laugh or smile.
12. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tokoname_ware

13. ↑ Tools that have acquired a kami or spirit: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tsukumogami
14. ↑ Giant catfish that cause earthquakes. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Namazu
15. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/H%C5%8Dei_eruption
16. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rangaku
17. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hiraga_Gennai
18. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yamato_Takeru
19. ↑ Yoishi's unique speech patterns throughout the series include adding the particle 'Wa' at the end of her sentences, which is what's being referred to here. https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E3%82%8F#Particle
20. ↑ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yomotsu_Hirasaka
21. ↑ Kodaira cemetery: http://www.city.kodaira.tokyo.jp.e.fj.hp.transer.com/kurashi/000/000127.html
22. ↑ https://pif.fandom.com/wiki/Hitogata
23. ↑ The pun here is that corridor is Kairou, and lost child is Maigo in Japanese.
24. ↑ https://www.amazon.co.jp/%E6%82%AA%E9%AD%94%E5%85%A8%E6%9B%B8-%E5%BE%A9%E5%88%BB%E7%89%88-%E3%83%89%E3%83%A9%E3%82%B4%E3%83%B3%E3%83%96%B%E3%82%B9-%E4%BD%90%E8%97%A4-%E6%9C%89%E6%96%87/dp/4835456165
25. ↑ https://senli-fortune.com/sp/sp22.html